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EVELYN CAUGHT HER BREATH . . . ON THE FLOOR LAY THE RUBY

THE WHITE SAPPHIRE

A MYSTERY ROMANCE

BY

LEE FOSTER HARTMAN

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HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
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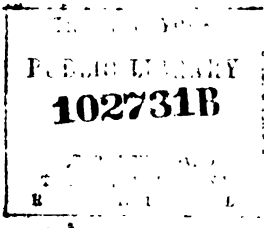

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PUBLISHED JANUARY, 1914
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ILLUSTRATIONS

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THE WHITE SAPPHIRE

THE WHITE SAPPHIRE

CHAPTER I

ON the veranda of the old Winthrop mansion, facing the blue line of the distant Berkshire Hills, Evelyn Winthrop stood watching the leisurely approach of a man on horseback. Her fingers abstractedly twisted the yellow paper of a telegram while her eyes roamed over the valley, always returning, however, to the young man on the saddle-horse who had now left the village and was slowly making his way toward the house. Beneath a white linen skirt the girl's foot tapped the porch floor as if in petulance at the rider's laggard progress. For a moment he was hidden behind trees, and on his emerging into view again she saw him draw rein and take a cigarette-case from his pocket. A thin cloud of smoke curled upward.

With a stamp of final exasperation the girl turned sharply to the further end of the porch and flounced down into a wicker chair.

"If he isn't the slowest of mortals!" she exclaimed, aloud, and then with wilful resignation she set the chair rocking with agile propulsions of her white-slippered feet.

Through the heavy growths of woodbine that screened the end of the porch to which she had retreated, the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun broke in scattered flecks and splashes, checkering the floor and the wicker lounging-chairs, the comfortable length of the couch, piled with cushions, and the light matting that stretched across the porch. In the stillness of the summer afternoon, among the white clematis that grew entangled with the woodbine, sounded the droning of bees. A cloth lay spread upon the table, where a tea-service was already placed. The broad, low windows opening upon the veranda gave a glimpse of darkened, cool interiors, with glints of light from gilt-framed canvases and the polished surface of furniture.

Evelyn Winthrop brought her chair abruptly to a halt. Leaning forward, she peered through the woodbine to note the progress of the rider and his horse. "I believe he'd let Patsy crawl if she knew how," she fumed. But slowly as the pair advanced, they had drawn perceptibly nearer and were now in full view of the house. The girl again sprang to her feet and, running to the head of the steps, sought to attract the horseman's attention by a vigorous fluttering of the yellow telegram. Whether or not he understood the signal as a summons to hasten, his answer was only a leisurely wave of the chamois-gloved hand in which he held his cigarette. It was gracefully, cavalierly done; but he made no effort to increase his speed.

"Stupid!" ejaculated the girl on the porch. "If I didn't have such tremendous news that I can't keep it an instant I'd scold him soundly for this.

Anyhow," she pursued, implacably, "he sha'n't have Patsy to ride again for a week."

A last recourse, however, was now open to her. From her lips came a shrill tremolo whistle, and the horse, instantly alert at the call, broke into a gallop, swinging gracefully into the graveled driveway and up the long slope leading to the house, while a groom came forward to relieve the rider. Evelyn Winthrop ran down the steps.

"It's a wireless from Jack and Uncle Geoff!" She waved the yellow paper at arm's-length. "The vessel docks this afternoon—they'll be home this evening!"

Archie Winthrop tossed his cigarette upon the gravel, and quizzically surveyed his cousin. "So that is why you were ramping about like a wild Indian. Really, you know," he went on with a glint of humor in his dark eyes, "from the road down there you made a most disturbing spectacle. House on fire, my first thought."

"Now, Archie, be sensible, and try to show a little joyous animation. Just think—Jack and Uncle Geoff, home this very evening!"

"I'm properly elated I assure you. After two years' wandering around the world the prodigal son —or brother, rather—is home at last. Veal for dinner to-night, Evie?"

"Silly! No—Jack doesn't like veal. Tell me, who is Montgomery Poole?"

"Montgomery Poole!"

"Yes; they are bringing him along."

"Where on earth did they pick him up? Why, Poole—oh, he's an engaging young half-expatriated

American with the cosmopolitan habit. Nice chap, Poole. Fine family — the Medford Pooles, you know—too much money for his own good. . . . I say, Evie, can't I have a cup of tea? You seem spread for it."

They had mounted the steps together, and Archie Winthrop now stretched himself comfortably among the cushions on the couch. In one gloved hand he still held his riding-crop, with which he idly thwacked his boots.

"Lazy man! You don't deserve anything, the way you crawled up the road when you could see I wanted you to hurry. And you're not a bit glad that Jack's coming home. But I suppose I must feed you," she ended with a sigh, and nodded to the servant who had appeared inquiringly at the doorway.

"That's uncommonly nice of you, Evie," the man on the couch pursued, "and you're looking uncommonly sweet this afternoon, aren't you?" His eyes ran approvingly over her trim white figure, the tanned arms bare to the elbow, the healthy red and brown tints of her face, and the soft wavy masses of hair that surmounted it, the slender, white-shod feet that now tapped impatient protest. She ignored his comment.

"Tell me about Montgomery Poole. Is he nice?"

"Too old for you, Evie, my dear. Why, Poole—I don't know. I met him once or twice in London last year—versatile chap—been everywhere, done everything—general all-round amateur—dabbler in art, science, whatever you like—uncommonly long on criminal law or something of that kind, I believe,

Nice chap, though. We'll have some ripping good bridge to-night. When do they get here?"

Grimes came out with a jug of hot water, and Evelyn tossed the telegram to her cousin while she busied herself with the cups and saucers.

"Hullo! Will you look at the length of this!" exclaimed Archie lazily, smoothing out the telegram. "Extravagant brother you've got, Evie."

"Jack's a dear, and much nicer to me than you are."

"'Will dock about noon,'" Archie read from the wireless despatch. "Hm! That strikes me as a bit optimistic of Jack, with the fussing at quarantine, and the immigrant dickering, and the customs holdup yet to be faced. Still—they ought to make the three-o'clock express."

"What time is it now?"

"Quarter to five."

"You're only guessing."

"A very good guess, just the same."

"Haven't you your watch?"

"I plead guilty to having it somewhere about me," replied the recumbent young man. "But to get at it I'd have to go through the uncomfortable process of turning over or even sitting up—"

Evelyn set her cup down with a thump. "Then over you roll and up you get! I want to know the exact time."

Archie groaned and prepared to comply, but just then the deep note of a locomotive whistle and the rumble of a train sounded from the valley, and he settled back with a grunt of satisfaction. "It is now, Miss Inquisitive, precisely two minutes after five.

That's the White Mountain Express, and I'd back it against all the timepieces around the place."

"Oh dear! A whole hour and a half yet to wait!" Evelyn took up her cup again. "All the same, it wasn't nice of you not to take out your watch. And, by the way, I'm not going to let you ride Patsy again for a week. That's to punish you for dawdling along when I waved to you to hurry."

"Shorter sentence in event of good behavior?" queried the culprit.

"I sha'n't promise."

Archie Winthrop laboriously manœuvered to replace his empty cup on the table without sitting up, then found himself compelled to rise after all in order to extract his cigarette-case from his pocket. He now leaned back among the cushions, puffing upward thin clouds of smoke and complacently surveying his cousin. He was a handsome fellow of twenty-eight or twenty-nine, dark-eyed and dark-haired, with a certain slenderness and grace of movement that marked the Winthrop blood in him. His riding-clothes were carefully tailored, even ultra-fashionable in cut, but he wore them without a hint of foppishness. He had the air of a man who had never had quarrel or question with life—one who with good-natured indolence had acquiesced in his lot, vaguely conscious that in the common regard of men it was an enviable one.

"Look here, Thistles," he began, with teasing, cousinly freedom. She was only his second cousin, and "once removed" at that. "When are you going to marry me?"

"I don't know that I'm even engaged to you as yet," she answered, pertly.

"Oh yes, you are. Everybody says so."

"I don't say so."

"But that makes you a minority of one—and that's quite hopeless, you know."

The minority of one sipped her tea, quite unimpressed.

"Just ask any one in the village if we're not engaged," persisted the man, teasingly.

"Suppose you do the asking yourself."

"All right. If you'll abide by the verdict," Archie responded with alacrity.

"Now don't be silly, Archie. You've been a bad boy to-day, and I sha'n't talk nonsense with you any longer. Besides," and she rose from her chair, "it's quite time I should be dressing for Jack and Uncle Geoff."

"You couldn't make yourself look more beautiful than you are now." The man's tone had lost its accent of badinage. "Tell me you love me, Evie." He had risen from the couch, and now put his arm around her; his words, while wheedling and lightly put, were earnestly spoken.

"Don't, Archie." She made a movement as if gently to disengage herself. "You know I've always liked you," she pleaded. "We've always been such good playmates—"

"But we aren't children any longer, Evie. Say you will marry me—some day."

"Please, Archie—not yet, not yet." She looked up at him kindly, smiling through misty eyes. "Be good to Thistles."

Her lips were a temptation, but he refrained. He held her a moment longer in silence, while her eyes shrank from his to the broad reaches of the valley. Suddenly she started violently from his arms as a motor-car speeding along the road dashed into view.

"Why, it can't be! It is! It's Jack and Uncle Geoff!" She darted across the porch with fleeting, joyous feet, and then down the steps. "They must have caught the White Mountain Express, after all!"

With her shrill tremolo call and a wild, exultant wave of her hand she sped across the lawn to intercept the approaching motor-car as it came circling up the driveway. There were answering shouts of welcome, and the chauffeur, divining her intention, endeavored to slow down the car as it came abreast of her. A moment more and she had sprung daringly upon the footboard amidst a chorus of warning exclamations; then strong arms lifted her, laughing, into the tonneau, and the car resumed its course.

Besides the odd-looking Japanese man seated alongside of the chauffeur, there were three occupants of the car which Evelyn had impetuously boarded. Released from the sturdy arms of her brother Jack, who looked strangely older, she noted, and deeply tanned from his two years' sojourn in the Far East, she was less boisterously greeted by a portly, middle-aged gentleman — Colonel Geoffrey Winthrop—who pressed a close-cut mustache to her cheek with a "There, there, Evie! Just as much of a romp as ever, I see. Deuce take it, though, you shouldn't have done it. This is Mr. Poole, whose feet you must be stepping on as well as mine."

Out of the floundering welcome in the arms of her

uncle and brother, Evelyn now recovered what dignity she could hastily muster to extend her hand to the third member of the party. From beneath a low-drawn panama hat, which was now lifted, a pair of penetrating gray eyes had already fixed hers keenly, and a cool, firm palm inclosed her hand for an instant. She flushed for no reason at all, and in the moment of confusion was provoked with herself for this show of color. Wheeling about, she leaped from the car as it halted at the porch, and in the general descent that followed, while Archie came forward to greet the travelers, she had an unnoticed moment in which she furtively scanned the strange young man in gray flannels who was giving some order in a foreign tongue to the Japanese servant.

"I wonder if I shall like him," she asked herself, and in the next moment the question was forgotten as her brother Jack tumultuously threw his arm around her and ran her, laughing, up the steps.

"The old place hasn't changed much in two years," he remarked, looking familiarly about him. "You've shifted the tennis-court, I see. Say, Archie, I'm open to challenges in spite of my sea legs."

"You're on, young man—to-morrow morning," retorted Archie, quick to renew an old-time rivalry. "Play tennis, Poole?"

"Poole plays nothing but that infernal game of *go*," cut in Jack, disgustedly.

"*Go?* What is that?" Archie looked inquiringly at Poole, who merely smiled.

"Oh, you'll see," Jack ran on. "It's some weird Japanese contrivance that would give the blind staggers to a chess champion. Take my advice,

Archie, and keep away from it—and you, too, Sis." With his arm still about her, he administered another abrupt, impulsive hug.

"*Please*—Jack!" she protested, but her eyes beamed up at him. "Is it too late to offer you some tea?" she asked, as Grimes appeared to take charge of the baggage.

"Tea?" echoed Jack. "If there's any tea around, that Jap of Poole's can lap it up. We want some Scotch. Hullo, Grimes! We're all back from the bottom side of the earth, and ready to make trouble for you."

The butler grinned appreciatively at his young master. "Scotch and soda for all, sir?" he asked with deference.

"Rye for Uncle Geoff—Scotch for the rest of us, Grimes, and pour the tea down Kenji Kato's neck."

"Very good, sir."

"Jack!" remonstrated Evelyn. "How you talk!"

"Let him run on, Evie—there's no stopping him," Colonel Winthrop admonished with a patient sigh. He seated himself a trifle slowly in one of the wicker chairs. "I declare, it's certainly good to be home again. Fine view that across the valley—eh, Poole? Try these," he ended, offering his cigarette-case.

"Have we permission, Miss Winthrop?" Poole's gray eyes were turned toward Evelyn.

"Good Lord! Poole," Jack broke in. "Permission! Smoke all over the place as much as you like." But Poole's gaze, unaffected by this rejoinder, was fixed upon Evelyn, who nodded a quick smile of assent. Then he flung a cigarette across to his young host. "Have one, Jack?"

"Thanks! And — now — Evie" — in the pauses Jack lighted the cigarette—"I will recount in full detail the history of our two years abroad." He had seated himself on the porch floor at the head of the steps, his back against one of the big white pillars.

Archie groaned a protest.

"Doesn't appeal to you, Archie? Then get Poole to tell you how he played detective in London and put one over the Scotland Yard chaps."

"By Jove!" put in Colonel Winthrop, "that was clever, you know."

"Poole should have been a detective," Jack rattled on. "If you ever take a notion to earn your own living, Poole, go in for sleuthing."

"Thanks, Jack, I'll bear it in mind. And if you ever have any little jobs in that line around here—" Poole's eyes flickered with amusement.

"Oh, nothing big enough for you could ever happen around these abandoned hills." Jack looked out over the beautiful valley with a countryman's disfavor toward things rural. "The village yonder is still talking about the War of 1812. For real novelty and cleverness in crime you've got to stick to the city."

As Grimes reappeared with a tray of glasses tinkling with ice Evelyn withdrew to give orders about the dinner. Later, in her room, she dressed herself, glowing with happy excitement. Across the floor stretched the last long rays of the sun sinking in a golden haze to the rim of the dark, distant hills. Through the open window, in the soft evening stillness, came the sound of voices from the group that still lingered on the veranda, and at

frequent intervals Jack's hearty, boisterous laugh. Her heart surged in happy response to it.

"Jack's a dear," she murmured, "and I know he's outgrown—everything." She hesitated over the word, and sighed. Then a final adjustment of the ribbon over her hair absorbed her. There was a slow, measured footstep in the corridor, and she dropped the mirror, her toilette accomplished, and slipped to the door. Colonel Winthrop was passing on his way to his room.

"Oh, Uncle Geoff!"

He caught both the hands impulsively extended to him and surveyed her admiringly. "Glad we're home, eh?"

"It's been so long—and so lonesome," she said. There was a sudden catch in her voice.

"I know, I know," replied Colonel Winthrop, gently. His eyes lifted to the portrait of Evelyn's father that hung at the far end of the hall. A year and a half had passed since his death, which had come suddenly while Colonel Winthrop and Jack were in India. "Poor child! You shouldn't have been left alone that way. If we could only have come to you—if we could even have known—" he tried to comfort her.

There was a film of tears in Evelyn's eyes. "But father was glad that Jack was with you and working hard, and that you had such good reports to make of him. . . . And now you are home again, and he's —gone. It doesn't seem quite right to be so happy —so very happy—" she smiled pitifully through her tears—"and yet—"

"There, there, my dear. Your father wouldn't

want you to be otherwise, I know," Colonel Winthrop assured her. "Tell me about yourself. How you've grown! Taller than I am, Evie!"

She smiled at his little joke, for since her sixteenth birthday she had overtopped the diminutive stature of her uncle by a head.

"Engaged to Archie yet?" he queried.

"No." She gave a little toss of her head.

"In love?"

She hesitated, then brightened upon him: "Only with you, Uncle."

"There, there, Evie." He laughed and kissed her. "Same old flatterer, aren't you? Well, I must be getting along to my room. Can't dress in a jiffy like those young chaps outside. Hope Grimes got my boxes up all right. Something nice in one of them for you, Evie."

"Oh, *tell* me!"

"No, no. Not till after dinner. Something nice, though. Something white—and red." He started to move on, but Evelyn held him a moment longer.

"Has Jack really been a good boy?" she asked.

"An angel."

"You know what I mean, Uncle."

"Straight as a die, Evie. That mess he got into at college—pretty bad, I admit. But two years abroad with him has made me change my first belief—what your father thought and dreaded at the time. Only wild oats—boy's foolishness. Your dad and I were boys ourselves once."

"But Jack—it's different with him, you know."

"All bosh, Evie. Lombroso's an ass. Now I must get along and do my primping."

CHAPTER II

"BUT if I *hadn't* held the ten of hearts!" exclaimed Evelyn, as Poole, her partner at bridge, went game and rubber. It had been a close race for the odd trick.

"But you did," answered Poole, smiling at her consternation over the precipice now safely skirted. "It was the pivotal card in the play of the whole hand."

"But you couldn't *know* that I held it," persisted Evelyn, "and if I hadn't—" She paused to contemplate the disaster that would have resulted.

"Oh, it's Poole's detective instinct," grumbled Jack, as he watched Archie add up the score of the rubber that had been snatched from them. "I declare, though, it's uncanny—to lead away from an established queen-jack at that stage of the game so that Evie could get in and come through Archie's clubs."

"Shall we cry quits, Jack?" Archie gathered up the scattered cards and gazed dubiously at the totals of the score-columns. For two hours after dinner they had been almost silently engrossed over the card-table—Colonel Winthrop cutting in on alternate rubbers with Mrs. Scoville, Evelyn's governess, who still remained a member of the household, although her duties had ceased many years ago.

"Yes, let's stop," agreed Jack. "It's no use bucking Poole this way—unless Uncle Geoff wants to try it again?"

"No, thanks. I've had enough for to-night," replied Colonel Winthrop from the chair at Poole's back, from which point of vantage he had watched Poole's play with close attention. "I declare, Poole, you do divine some things—"

"Oh, he's a wizard," interjected Jack. "I say, Poole, can you do any tricks with cards?"

"I'm sorry—not one." Poole pushed his chair back from the card-table and relighted his cigar. "And as for bridge, Jack, it's largely a matter of guessing right only when you can't reason further."

"But I always guess wrong," complained Jack.

"You mean you begin guessing too soon. You don't give your reasoning faculties a fair chance," replied Poole.

"Well, *you* needn't laugh." Jack bridled at Evelyn, and then grinned sheepishly. "Just the same, Poole, I think some people have a genius for guessing right—a successful detective, for instance. With him it's surely instinct."

"No, I disagree with you there. To my thinking, guessing is only a last resort. A detective formulates theories—"

"But theories are only elaborate guesses," interposed Archie.

"In one sense, yes," admitted Poole. "A theory in detective work, however, is a process of logical reasoning from the evidence in hand—you take a running start along the line of ascertained fact, so to speak, and then jump into the air of presumption.

Now if you have followed the facts in the right direction your guess should carry you further in the same direction—land you at about the right spot. But if you have merely done a half-circle around the facts in the case, of course you're likely to go off at a wrong tangent when you begin guessing."

"But how is a fellow going to draw a bee-line across a lot of tangled-up or even contradictory facts?" demanded Jack.

Poole reflectively blew a thin cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "I dare say it's an art. Like writing or painting, it requires constructive imagination. A detective and a novelist are, in a way, opposites. The novelist takes a character and builds up in story form the thoughts and acts that, put together, make that character what it is. The detective, beginning with facts that represent the thoughts and acts of some unknown character, tries to put them together and find others to match them until that character stands revealed. And like the artist, the detective must have a critical faculty to hold his imagination in check. Plenty of people, with imagination enough and to spare, fail as writers or painters simply because they lack the power to correct their imagination—they can't criticize their own work as they proceed, and so they go wrong. In this respect the detective is frequently at much the greater disadvantage. An artist or writer can pause and look over his work, and if a figure is out of drawing he can erase it or do it over; if a personage in a story slips out of character, the page can be rewritten. But the detective is peculiarly handicapped by the factor of time. He must imagina-

tively put together his facts and adduce motives, and then *act speedily* upon the theory he builds up. But if his first deductions turn out wrong, there is nothing for it but to go back and begin over again and too frequently this is impossible."

"But if you put a dozen men at once on a case," struck in Jack, "one of them ought to guess right."

"True," responded Poole, "one man's mind will correct another's. But I'm talking about the detective's work rather as a *fine art*, and not as the very necessary form of police activity you are thinking of. I confess I should like to see the criminal who is really an artist in his line pitted against a single detective equally skilled in his craft. Then you would get artistic possibilities and something like real sportsmanship."

"But what would the world come to—" began Colonel Winthrop, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, of course," Poole laughed. "In practice there is no place for detective work pursued merely as a fine art. The police have got to get results, and they do their work well enough, but they don't do it *artistically*. With them it's merely a question of hitting the target or missing it; therefore they use a shot-gun instead of a rifle. But there's no sportsmanship about it without the rifle."

"I guess the common run of criminals would vote for the artistic method, all right," said Jack with a laugh.

"If it meant security, yes. They wouldn't appreciate it beyond that. But there are criminals of artistic temperament, just as there are detectives who are really artists in their methods of work.

One is always seeking the other, though of course they seldom meet. Each works by himself. The criminal who is instinctively an artist will tolerate no pals; the true detective wants no colleagues. Each, of course, may employ helpers—much as a sculptor does. Mind you, I'm not finding fault with the methods by which law and order are preserved; I'm only contending that in this field there is scope for artistic execution which is generally overlooked."

"If we could only commit some crime, now, just for Poole's benefit," suggested Archie.

"Oh, Archie, how dreadful!" exclaimed Evelyn.

"Not a bad idea!" put in Colonel Winthrop. "What do you say, Jack—couldn't we frame up some little problem, something short of actual crime, you know, and give Poole a chance to show his skill?"

Poole laughed. "Now, please don't presume that I'm posing as an example of the type of man I've been talking about. I've merely been pointing out that there's a field. Barring that little affair in London and one other adventure, I'm quite as much a raw amateur at the detective business as any of you would be in playing the rôle of criminal. I'm afraid we should end only in making an absurd mess of a pretentious game of hide-and-seek."

Jack, with outstretched legs and his hands plunged into his trousers pockets, was deep in thought. "The criminal end of the game would be easy enough," he reflected, aloud. "All the ingenuity and hard work would be up to Poole."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Poole. "There is many a problem simple enough for the detective

which the criminal—or call him the problem-maker —can't successfully complicate to save his soul."

Poole's eyes flashed about the room as if in search of something. Then he rose to his feet and stepped to the wide, flat-topped desk on which stood a lighted reading-lamp, a heavy, old-fashioned bronze ink-stand, and a variety of writing-materials and accessories. Scattered upon it also were half a dozen numbers of the current magazines.

"For example," Poole resumed, seating himself at the desk, "suppose that I am the criminal and that I have stolen something from one of you which it is imperative that I conceal here in the room, practically under your eyes. The restrictions are such that, even if I effect the concealment, my problem is much more difficult than yours of thwarting it, or laying it bare afterward."

Poole casually drew from his waistcoat pocket a brilliant, sparkling stone. "If you please, Miss Winthrop, will you look at this?" He handed the jewel across the desk to Evelyn, who rose to take it.

"What a beautiful diamond!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Uncle Geoffrey, look!"

"Too fine a stone to carry loose in that fashion, Poole," exclaimed the Colonel, adjusting his eye-glasses and turning the stone about in his fingers while it flashed and shone as each sharp-cut facet caught the light. The jewel went round the circle and was returned to Poole.

"Suppose, now, I try to conceal it here before you."

"Why, how absurd!" broke in Evelyn, who confronted Poole across the desk.

"Perhaps." Poole looked up at her and slowly smiled. Then he took up the stone, examining it critically. "By the way, you are all mistaken in thinking this to be a diamond. It is not a diamond, but a white sapphire."

"A white sapphire!" cried Evelyn, leaning over the desk. "Oh, do let me see it again!"

"One moment, please," Poole stayed her outstretched hand. "It is the method of cutting the stone—what is termed among jewelers the 'brilliant' cut—that naturally deceives one into hastily thinking it a diamond. Now the style of cutting that jewel on the lady's hand in that engraving up there" —Poole indicated a picture on the opposite wall, and all eyes were directed to it—"look closely and you will note—I mean, if you will now look this way again, you will note that I have concealed the white sapphire." Poole exhibited a pair of empty hands.

"Oh, you fraud!" exclaimed Evelyn, and a general laugh followed.

"Search him," suggested Archie.

"If you like," readily assented Poole. "But I can save you the trouble, for you have my word for it that I have not concealed the stone about my person."

Evelyn blankly viewed the various objects upon the writing-table. "You didn't have time to leave the chair, and you couldn't very well have tossed it across the room," she pursued.

"Very good, Miss Winthrop. That is the first step in the logical consideration of the problem. Now what?"

Jack stepped forward to the desk and began turn-

ing over the articles upon it. Poole leaned back in his chair, watching him.

"That, Jack, is only a kind of haphazard guessing you are up to. The white sapphire is not merely concealed from sight; it is definitely and securely hidden. That is to say, the servants could clean the room to-morrow, turning everything inside out, without disturbing the jewel. It is safe until it is logically traced out."

"Then what is the use of looking?" questioned Evelyn, in perplexity.

"None whatever. It's a problem that must be reasoned out. I leave it to you—to-morrow, or next week, or any time—as you like. The white sapphire is there—somewhere—for any one who can find it." Poole rose from the desk. "I wonder if I can have a word with my Japanese man," he said, aside, to Jack.

"I'll call Grimes; and if the show is over, how about something to drink out on the porch. Join me, Poole?"

The group began to break up, Mrs. Scoville bidding the others good night, while Poole excused himself for a moment to go in search of Kenji Kato.

"I think I'll say good night, too," said Evelyn.

"One moment, Evelyn," broke in her uncle. "I'd almost forgotten. Here's a little souvenir of our sojourn in India for you." Colonel Winthrop, fumbling in the pocket of his waistcoat, brought out a small tissue-wrapped packet which he handed to Evelyn. "They are rare dainties," he added, "from an old exhausted mine in Cashmir."

Evelyn unrolled the twisted paper. . . . "Oh, Uncle Geoff!"

A dozen or more diamonds lay revealed. They were of a rare and exquisite tint—a faint pink-white—and they lay sparkling in her hand like bits of imprisoned liquid fire. Among them gleamed a single ruby.

"Jack, and Archie—look! Aren't they beautiful!" Evelyn held out the paper in which nestled the little glistening stones.

"Picked them up in Calcutta," explained the Colonel. "They were originally set in a brooch—the ruby in the center—but I didn't much fancy the Hindu design of the mounting, so I had them taken out. I'll have them set for you, Evie, in whatever way you like."

"I declare, Evie, you'll look quite a duchess with all those on," said Jack.

"That's a beautiful tinge of pink in the diamonds," commented Archie, letting the stones roll slowly about in his hand and watching the iridescent flashing of the jewels. "And the ruby—perfect color. . . . Hold your hands, Thistles," and he poured the stones in a miniature flashing cascade into her two outspread palms. Evelyn, with both hands gripped close upon the stones, threw her arms ecstatically around Colonel Winthrop, overwhelming him with her thanks.

"There, there! put 'em away where they'll be safe," said her uncle, recovering himself from her embrace.

Evelyn poured the stones gleefully from one palm to the other. "I'll put them in the safe in the library for to-night."

There was a soft footfall in the hall, and Kenji Kato at the doorway looked in uncertainly.

"Pardon." He bowed profoundly. "Mr. Poole send for me?"

"Why, yes, Kenji, he's looking for you somewhere," answered Jack.

"Pardon," and the black head bowed again. "I find him."

Evelyn presently crossed the hall to the library, whither Jack followed her. The walls of the room were lined high with shelves of books, dark leather bindings in ordered and dignified rows—science, philosophy, belles-lettres, marking the wide-ranging taste of Evelyn's father in his scholarly and dilettante enthusiasms. In one corner of the room, quite encompassed by the rows of books, stood an old-fashioned iron safe—now seldom used except on the rare occasions when Evelyn made it a depository for sums of money inconveniently large which chanced to be in her hands overnight. Within, was a cash-drawer and a series of dusty compartments, a few of which were stuffed with old and yellowing papers —receipts, vouchers of various kinds, memoranda bearing on the estate—all carefully docketed and tucked away years ago.

"One of these days, Jack, you must look through those old papers," said Evelyn, who had opened the combination lock and now threw back the door, disclosing the musty interior.

"Nothing but rubbish there, Evie. Why don't you chuck it?"

"I know there's nothing of value; but I don't like to destroy such things, so I wish you would make sure." Then with her face still averted, she added, gently, "You are the 'lord of the manor' now, you know."

Jack's face sobered. "So I am," he answered, quietly.

While in India, during the year and a half that had elapsed since his father's death, he had hardly given a thought to the responsibilities that would devolve upon him at his return, and he scarcely realized as yet his position as master in the old Berkshire house. The truth now came somewhat abruptly upon him as he stood there facing the old iron safe, in the room which still seemed to reflect his father's presence. There were account-books on the adjoining shelves and business papers on the desk that must be looked after; he was suddenly awake to the fact that these awaited him.

"All right, Evie, I'll look into them the first chance I get. I guess there's no hurry. By the way, what's the state of the exchequer?"

"What do you mean, Jack?"

"I'm clean busted, and I want to pay Poole back for a loan he made me."

"Why don't you ask Uncle?"

Jack shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "Well, you see Uncle's been drawing the purse-strings a bit tight lately, and I'd rather he didn't know that I made a touch upon Poole. I want two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred dollars!" Evelyn repeated, with a little gasp.

"Well, it won't bust the estate, I guess."

"But, Jack, I haven't any such sum as that! There's only twenty dollars here in the safe, and I've only five or ten in my purse. You'll have to ask Mr. Haldane. He's the executor, you know."

"Oh, bother! Can't you write me a check, Evie?"

Evelyn slowly shook her head. "You see, the estate is still in the hands of the court. You will have to get the money from Mr. Haldane, and make out a voucher explaining what it's for."

Jack frowned impatiently. "Can't you charge it to household expenses? What's that old gray-haired mummy got to do with our money, anyway?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Jack—"

"Well, let it go." Jack knocked the ashes from his pipe and tossed it down upon the table. "I'll have to tackle Uncle Geoff, after all," he concluded, but his face betrayed that he did not relish the prospect.

Evelyn had taken from the desk a curious little metal box of Oriental design. Into this she dropped the stones one by one until they all lay nestled together, the lone ruby showing a sullen red among the sparkling diamonds. Putting the box on an upper shelf in the safe, she closed the iron door and locked it. The cylinders clicked stiffly under her fingers.

"You don't mind sleeping out in the bungalow, do you?" she asked her brother as they went out to join the others on the porch. "Mr. Poole is to have your old room up-stairs."

"Suits me," said Jack, briefly, and he followed Evelyn from the room, a perplexed, absent frown upon his brow.

"Hullo, Poole!" he broke out, discerning, as they came out on the veranda, a long form stretched out

in one of the wicker chairs. "Did you find Kenji Kato?"

The tip of Poole's cigar flashed red for an instant out of the gloom.

"Yes, I found him," said Poole.

CHAPTER III

COLONEL GEOFFREY WINTHROP, freshly shaved and arrayed in immaculate linen and white serge, paused in the doorway of the dining-room and surveyed the breakfast table with the keen anticipation of a healthy, well-preserved man of fifty-eight who had enjoyed a sound night's sleep in the country air and was prepared to do justice to the leisurely processes of an eight-thirty-o'clock breakfast.

Evelyn, seated at the coffee-urn, and Archie and Jack, were already at the table. They had begun their foray upon a big dish of freshly cut cantaloupe that showed deep green and salmon pink among nuggets of ice. Grimes was arranging the covered breakfast dishes over heaters on a side-table. Before the open windows the curtains lifted gently in the sunshine and soft morning breeze that poured into the room. There was an exchange of salutations, in which the July morning was pronounced to be glorious.

"Where's Poole? Not up yet?" inquired Colonel Winthrop, seating himself at the table, and with a fondness for old-time habit tucking the corner of his napkin into his expansive waistcoat. "I must say, this *is* delightful after breakfasting for the last week on that beastly British liner."

"Or not breakfasting at all," wickedly added Jack, who recalled certain temptestuous mornings when his uncle had had to forego the hazard of the ship's dining-saloon. "I wonder what's keeping Poole abed—ah! here comes the late Mrs. Scoville," he exclaimed teasingly as the aged governess entered. "Slipping into bad habits during my absence, I see. Can't have that, you know. Breakfast is at eight-thirty sharp," he ended magisterially from the head of the table.

Archie groaned. "I see where we are in for a régime of petty tyranny while Jack's getting accustomed to his new authority."

Mrs. Scoville only smiled indulgently at her former charge. "Evelyn," she began, addressing the girl from habit, "there's the queerest hole in the door of the library safe. I just now noticed it."

"Hole in the safe!" echoed Jack.

"My diamonds!" exclaimed Evelyn in dismay, and darted from the table out of the room.

"Did you say a hole in the safe, Mrs. Scoville?" Colonel Winthrop laid down the spoon with which he had begun upon his melon. Grimes, from a side-table, turned with a dish of cutlets in his hand to stare at Mrs. Scoville.

"Why, I was putting the morning papers on the table in the library when I happened to notice it —a small round hole in the door of the safe. It looked as if it had been drilled. There was a little pile of metal-dust on the floor beneath it."

"Then there *was* some one in the house last night," exclaimed Archie. "Grimes and I—"

He was interrupted by Evelyn's precipitate return

to the dining-room with the jewel-box in her hand. "They're safe! But the money's gone—the cash-drawer is empty!"

At the doorway appeared Montgomery Poole.

"Hullo, Poole! You're just in time," called out Colonel Winthrop. "Here's a job in your line already!"

"The safe's been robbed during the night," explained Jack, who had risen from the table. "Let's have a look—"

There was a sudden cry of dismay from Evelyn. "The ruby is gone!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide upon the jewel-box now open in her hand. "The diamonds are here, but the ruby has been stolen!" The color paled in her cheek.

"The ruby stolen!" echoed Colonel Winthrop. "Only the ruby? Are you sure?"

"Let's go and investigate," urged Jack. "Come on, Poole, to the library—"

"One moment, please!" Poole's words came sharply, halting the others for an instant. His glance had been traveling keenly from one face to another. "May I have a word of enlightenment as to just what has happened? You say there has been a robbery—"

"Yes—the safe in the library. Come along, Poole." Jack caught the other's arm, but Poole stayed him.

"Not so fast, Jack. May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Then I advise a more systematic procedure."

"Yes, yes," agreed Colonel Winthrop, "let Poole conduct this affair."

"The safe in the library may wait until one or two preliminary facts are ascertained here in the dining-room," continued Poole. "I can see from Grimes's face that he has something to communicate—"

"Grimes!" Jack echoed the name sharply and wheeled about to regard the butler. "Out with it, Grimes—"

"Hold on, Jack." Poole advanced to the breakfast table. "Won't you all take your seats again? Thank you. And I will do the same. Now, if you please, may I hear just what has happened from one of you—you, Colonel Winthrop." Poole leaned forward in his chair and folded his arms casually upon the table. Jack fidgeted impatiently on the edge of his chair. Evelyn's face was pale and drawn. The jewel-box, with which she toyed unconsciously, trembled in her fingers.

"I know nothing about it," disclaimed Colonel Winthrop while Poole's gray eyes were fastened upon him in close attention. "It was Mrs. Scoville who discovered the robbery. We were all at breakfast here—that is, Evelyn, Jack, Archie, and myself—when Mrs. Scoville—hardly a moment before you came in yourself, Poole—entered with the announcement that she had just now noticed a curious hole drilled in the door of the safe—the safe in the library. Evelyn, naturally concerned about her jewels, runs to investigate—"

"The bolts were thrown back—" interrupted Evelyn, and then checked herself abruptly. "I beg your pardon," she ended with a sudden flush.

Poole turned toward her searchingly. "On the contrary, won't you continue?"

Evelyn's fingers twitched and tightened upon the jewel-box in her hand. Her eyes challenged Poole's and then shrank from them, and when she spoke it was with evident effort.

"I suppose I ought to explain that last evening Uncle Geoffrey gave me these beautiful diamonds and a ruby which he brought from India. I put them in the safe overnight. Naturally, Mr. Poole, I was alarmed for their safety on hearing what Mrs. Scoville said. I ran at once to the library. I found the cash-drawer open and the money gone. The jewels, which I had put away in this box, I thought at first had not been molested. But now I have discovered that one of the stones has been taken—the ruby."

"May I see the stones, Miss Winthrop?"

The jewel-box was passed across the table to Poole.

"Was anything else taken?" he asked.

"I didn't stop to look. But there is nothing else in the safe except a lot of old papers."

"How much money was in the safe?"

"Hardly more than twenty dollars. I very seldom have money in the house except when the servants are paid on the first of the month."

"Hm!" was Poole's comment. He studied the jewels a moment and then returned the box to Evelyn. "The diamonds are certainly exquisite. I have rarely seen a more beautiful color in such stones."

"I had the good luck to come across them in Calcutta," explained Colonel Winthrop. "They are from an ancient mine in Cashmir that is no longer worked. That pink-white tinge is extremely rare,

and the stones, if I may say it, are of considerable value."

"And the ruby?" queried Poole.

"It was the chief—the central stone in the original setting—cut like the others. When I purchased them they were all mounted in a small brooch."

"To recur to the safe a moment, Miss Winthrop, you did not find it locked?"

"No. The door was closed, but the bolts were not thrown," replied Evelyn.

"A combination lock, I presume?"

Evelyn nodded.

"May I ask whether any one else in the household knows the combination?"

"No, no one but me."

"Well, then, we might now go to the library," suggested Poole, rising from the table.

"One minute, please," broke in Archie, who had been keeping an impatient silence. "I think Grimes and I can give some further details in regard to this affair."

There was a murmur of surprise, as all eyes now turned to Archie. Evelyn's face had gone suddenly white at her cousin's words.

"Ah, yes, I thought Grimes could tell us something," said Poole, pausing. Won't you begin, then, Mr. Winthrop?"

Archie leaned earnestly across the table. "My bedroom is in the wing of the house on the ground-floor," he said, "and both windows face on the lawn. Sometime during the night I was awakened by a light flashing in my face, as if some one passing on the outside had accidentally flashed a light or—"

"A pocket searchlight?" suggested Poole.

"Something of that sort—through the window. I am very sensitive to light when asleep, and I was broad awake in an instant. Then I heard sounds in the hall. I slipped into a bathrobe and slippers and stepped cautiously out into the corridor. At the door of the library I came upon Grimes with a candle. 'Did you hear anything?' he asked after he had gotten over the start I gave him. Grimes can tell you how—"

"If you will, Grimes," put in Poole.

The butler came forward from the side-table, where he had been a silent but interested witness to all that had taken place. "It's just as Mr. Winthrop's been a-telling of, sir. I was sleeping in the other wing of the house, sir, which leads off from the library. About half past two, I think it was, when I was awakened sudden-like by a noise, as if some one was opening or shutting a window. I sleep pretty light, sir, and any sounds like that in that end of the house I am pretty sure to hear. I waited and listened, but I didn't hear anything more. I was uneasy, though. I was sure I had heard something, sir, so I got up very quiet-like, lit a candle, and went through the lower rooms. At the library door I met Mr. Archie coming toward me, just as he's told you, sir. We went into the library together, but nothing seemed amiss in there, sir. Then we looked into the other rooms, but found nothing wrong, sir."

"You had a lighted candle, you say, Grimes?" queried Poole.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you look at the safe?"

"Not closely, sir. It seemed just the same as usual, sir. The windows were all shut. Nothing seemed amiss in that room, sir."

"Did you try the windows?"

"No, sir. But I am sure I fastened them before going to bed, sir."

Poole reflected a moment. "May I ask if any one else was disturbed during the night—you, Jack?"

"Me? No; you see I slept out in the bungalow—like a top," answered Jack. "Can't we have a look at the safe now, Poole?"

"If no one has anything more to bring forward—" Poole's eyes went questioningly around the table.

The dining-room was abandoned with alacrity in the common desire to inspect the scene of the burglary itself, Jack bolting ahead of the others.

At the threshold of the library there was a pause and a general craning of necks in the direction of the old iron safe in the corner. Then the family, with Grimes bringing up the rear, entered the library in a somewhat awed but eager procession. Poole's eyes, which in the dining-room had been incessantly alert upon the faces of those gathered there, noting their every change of expression, now ran nimbly, as if in swift mental inventory, over the innumerable details of the room. The door of the safe stood slightly ajar, just as Evelyn had precipitately left it. Close to the lock, piercing the metal, was a small, clean-cut hole. Poole knelt to examine it and the metal-dust on the floor. An instant later he was abruptly on his feet and addressing Jack.

"I suggest that you notify the police at once that the house has been robbed." He brushed one hand against the other as if dismissing the matter.

"Oh, come, Poole," expostulated Jack, "we don't want the police butting in here, you know. They'd be an infernal nuisance, and we'd get ourselves into the papers, and there would be the deuce to pay generally."

Poole tried the windows, one of which flew easily open. He pointed to the bruised and splintered wood of the casement. "This window, as you can see, has been forced from the outside—'jimmied' in the usual fashion. The house has been forcibly entered and the safe robbed. This is burglary—a crime for the police to investigate."

"I know, Poole, but they only got away with a few dollars—"

"And the ruby," corrected Archie.

"I'll replace it, Evelyn," said Colonel Winthrop, quickly.

"Oh, please don't send for the police!" pleaded Evelyn.

Poole surveyed the group with a curious smile. "Well, then—" he began and paused. His glance fell again upon the open safe, and suddenly his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"It's up to you, Poole," exclaimed Jack. "I put the case unreservedly into your hands."

"Yes, yes," agreed Colonel Winthrop. "Here's your opportunity, Poole, and it will be most interesting to see what you make of it. The case seems to me to present some very peculiar features."

"Very peculiar features, indeed," commented

Poole, dryly. "I confess it interests me considerably." He hesitated, folded his arms, and paced across the room, frowning. "But look here, Jack, if I am to investigate this affair, one thing must be definitely understood at the outset."

"What's that?"

"I'm rather awkwardly placed. While your guest and enjoying your hospitality I shall also be acting in another capacity—professionally, you understand, like any other detective that you had called in to run down this burglary. I must have full liberty to work accordingly."

"Why, of course," assented Jack. "Everything you say goes."

"Even to ordering arrests on the premises, if necessary?" pursued Poole, sharply.

Jack frowned and looked uncertainly at Poole. "You're not suspecting any of us, are you?"

Poole shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "I am very sure none of you would be equal to *that*." He pointed to the hole in the safe. "That bears every mark of clean-cut professional work. But I must insist on a free hand, Jack. I can't be hampered in any way in this affair, and naturally, as your guest—"

"That's all right. You have *carte blanche* to do whatever you like," declared Jack, flatly. "And we will all obey your orders to the letter. Now what's your theory of this affair? Why should any one break open a safe to steal twenty dollars and leave Evelyn's diamonds untouched?"

"The ruby at least was taken," corrected Poole.

"Which makes it all the more mysterious—it

shows that the thief didn't overlook the box of jewels."

"Your question is certainly a poser, Jack," answered Poole, smiling, "and it's too soon to begin guessing. I suggest that you all return to breakfast while I make a little further examination of the room."

"But we want to see how you go about the process of unraveling the mystery," protested Colonel Winthrop. He had inspected with a great show of interest the window casement that had been forced, and he was now adjusting his eye-glasses to examine the hole in the safe door.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Colonel, but I venture to say that there will be no immediate developments of any startling importance"—Poole thrust his hands into his pockets and reflectively eyed the safe—"perhaps not for a week."

There was a murmur of disappointment.

"There is really nothing further to detain you here," said Poole as the group about him seemed reluctant to leave the library and return to the breakfast table. "So far as I can see, nothing in the room has been disturbed except the safe, and the thief has left no traces of his work but this dust from his drill on the floor. It is not surprising that the hole in the safe door should have escaped Mr. Winthrop and the servant when they investigated the library by candle-light." Poole turned to the safe. "This, I take it, is the cash-drawer from which the money was stolen. There appears to be nothing else in the safe worth molesting. On one of these empty shelves, I presume, Miss Winthrop

placed the box containing the jewels. Will you kindly show me which one?"

Evelyn stepped forward and pointed to a compartment in the upper right-hand corner.

"Thank you. And you found the box in the same place this morning?"

"Yes," replied Evelyn. "My first thought was that it had not been touched. In fact, when I first opened the box I did not realize that the ruby was missing."

"Your count of the diamonds, of course, shows that none of them has been taken too?"

"Why, no!" exclaimed Evelyn in new dismay, opening the jewel-box which she still carried in her hand. "How stupid of me! I never thought to count them last night."

"Doubtless Colonel Winthrop will remember," suggested Poole.

Colonel Winthrop drew his head in from the window where he had been eagerly peering at the ground outside. "What's that? I say, Poole, I've discovered something important—"

Poole interrupted him. "Yes, I know there are footprints on the ground outside. We will examine them presently, although I don't anticipate much information from them. The marks of the jimmy upon the casement are, to my thinking, much more illuminating as to the person who made them. But will you tell us, how many diamonds did you give Miss Winthrop last evening?"

"How many diamonds?" Colonel Winthrop echoed, and paused to reflect. "Why, bless me! Fifteen—or no, sixteen"—he paused again, frowning. "For the life of me, Poole, I'm not certain."

"It's rather important, Colonel Winthrop," Poole urged him.

"Yes, yes, let me think—" the Colonel's forehead was contracted in a puzzled frown.

Evelyn, who had been counting the diamonds in the box, looked up eagerly to announce the result, but Poole's gesture stayed her. "One moment, please, Miss Winthrop."

"I recollect now. There must have been sixteen stones in all—there were fifteen diamonds," announced Colonel Winthrop.

"Then none of the diamonds has been taken."

"Why, how did you know?" queried Evelyn, looking across at Poole in some surprise.

"I counted them in the dining-room," replied Poole, simply.

Jack laughed. "How many buttons up the back of Evelyn's dress?" he challenged jocosely.

"Seventeen."

"Why, the idea!" exclaimed Evelyn, flushing. There was a general laugh.

"Turn around, Evie, and let me count," said Jack, skeptically.

"Silly! No, you sha'n't!" Evelyn handed the jewel-box to her brother. "But you will please take this to the bank when you go to the village this morning. After what has happened I'm nervous about having the diamonds in the house."

"No more danger, Evie. We'll all sit up to-night with clubs," said Jack, but he took the jewel-box, which he carelessly thrust into his pocket.

"How about breakfast? Everything will be stone-cold," grumbled Archie.

The family filed back to the dining-room, where Grimes had already preceded them. Colonel Winthrop linked arms with Poole, Jack followed, and Evelyn found herself for a moment alone with Archie.

"Tell me, Archie, what did Mr. Poole mean about 'making arrests'?" she asked in some concern.

"Oh, that was just a bluff of Poole's to see how the rest of us would take it. You know we were all talking last night about fixing up some problem for him. Of course, that has put Poole on his guard, and I haven't a doubt he's suspecting every one of us."

"But it must have been a burglary," argued Evelyn.

"I haven't a doubt that it was a real burglary myself. But it also looks to me as if a real burglary had happened to coincide with a mock one perpetrated by one of us. The thing is so confoundedly peculiar—the ruby taken and the diamonds left untouched."

"Was it you, Archie?"

Archie laughed. "I'm not telling. How about yourself, Evie?"

Evelyn flushed. "I'm not telling, either."

CHAPTER IV

EVELYN came strolling round the side of the porch, humming a snatch of song. The July morning was in its full glory. Across the sky raced bits of cloud, flawless white against the sapphire. From hill to hill the valley lay in undulating stretches of green, bathed in sunshine, with the single church spire of the village glinting white above the clustered trees in the distance. There was a gentle breeze in the air, laden with the faint tang of white clematis and the fugitive odor of roses that had lingered on after June.

Evelyn had left the breakfast table, where the others were still eagerly discussing the robbery, and had come outdoors to give a cursory look to her flower-beds; but her glance—a thoughtful, puzzled frown—was rather upon the gravel walk than upon the flaming peonies and white-starred phlox. Rounding the corner of the veranda, she paused to look vaguely out across the green and golden valley, the palm of one hand locked within the other, and the dimples of her elbows showing above her bare, downthrust arms, rigid in a moment of silent mental debate. She seemed to press some searching, inward question upon the distant, misty-green hills, and then, as abruptly as she had halted, she dismissed her thoughts with a quick fling of her head,

and turned to mount the veranda steps. Here a curious sight met her eyes.

In a corner of the porch, screened by the woodbine, Kenji Kato squatted upon the floor. Before him stood a little stool-like affair, a flat, heavy block of wood mounted upon thick, carved legs. Its smooth surface was ruled into innumerable squares by fine, black-lacquered lines; and from two jars of ancient Japanese design Kenji Kato was alternately lifting white and black counters and placing them upon the board. He was so deeply absorbed in this performance that Evelyn's approach was unobserved.

"What a curious affair! Is it a game?" asked Evelyn, her curiosity piqued by the irregular lines of black and white disks that straggled in maze-like formation over the innumerable little squares.

Kenji Kato was immediately on his feet with his quaint, stiff little bow. "You know how play *go?*" he queried, politely.

Evelyn shook her head. The gilt and lacquered jars filled with white and black disks irresistibly attracted her, and she plumped, Turk fashion, to the floor beside the *go-ban.* "How smooth and nice they are!" she exclaimed, lifting a handful and allowing them to slip slowly through her fingers back into the jar. "What are they?"

"*Ishi*—stones," explained Kenji Kato, beaming, and dropping to the floor beside her. "Black ones, stone; white ones made from shell—you see?"

"Why, so they are! And how beautifully polished!"

Kenji's black head nodded. "You play—so!" He lifted one of the stones between his second and

third fingers and with a quick fillip, born of long practice, set it smartly down upon the board, then beamed at Evelyn.

"It looks awfully interesting."

"*Go*—very fine game," assented Kenji.

"But you don't play it alone?"

"No, I have play with Mr. Poole."

There was a step behind them. "Well, Kenji, a new pupil already?"

Evelyn turned to find Montgomery Poole standing a few feet away and looking down at her as she toyed with the *go*-stones. A cigar was between his lips—the first of the interminable series that seemed his daily habit—and he exhaled the smoke with a slow savoring of its fragrance. His gray eyes rested upon her own in quizzical interest.

"He's not half so old as he wants to pretend," was Evelyn's quick comment to herself, "and I'm not correspondingly twice as young—as he seems to think."

"I suppose you want my seat," she challenged, lightly, from her squat position on the floor.

Kenji Kato, in anticipation of the morning game, had begun to clear the *go-ban* of the stones that lay in black and white patterns upon it.

Poole smiled, and shook his head resolutely. "Not this morning."

Kenji looked up blankly. "You no play?"

"I'm sorry, Kenji, but this morning I work."

"But I wanted to watch," protested Evelyn. "It looks awfully fascinating."

Hope lighted for a moment in Kenji's eyes, but Poole remorselessly quenched it. His lips closed

decisively upon his cigar. "It *is* fascinating—altogether too fascinating. And you're tempting me, Miss Winthrop, at the very threshold of my career."

"Your career?"

"As a detective, you know."

"Now you're only joking. I think you might show me this game," pouted Evelyn.

"I don't dare even sit down to it. The Japanese have a proverb: *Go uchi wa oya no shini me ni mo awanu*—eh, Kenji? Which is as much as to say, Miss Winthrop, that a man playing *go* wouldn't leave off to be present at the death-bed of his father. And remember, your brother Jack warned you against this game yesterday."

"Pooh!" said Evelyn, with a toss of her head, "I never did mind Jack."

"Nor any one else, I dare say," added Poole with the air of laying down a profound philosophic fact.

Evelyn's chin abruptly tilted upward. She sprang nimbly to her feet, disdaining the hand Poole quickly reached out to her, and swept away in silence and great dignity. A dozen steps across the porch, she indiscreetly looked back. Poole was watching her, a faint smile playing about his lips.

"Well, *did* any one else ever mind Jack?" he demanded.

Evelyn halted sharply. "That isn't what you said," she retorted, implacably.

"That is precisely what I said," Poole contradicted.

Evelyn struggled to reflect. "But that isn't what you meant to say."

"That is precisely what I meant to say."

"You didn't. You meant—you implied—" She hesitated. "And it wasn't nice of you," she concluded, lamely, but with feminine conviction.

New light seemed to dawn upon Poole. "Oh, I see! You twist my words into the objective case when I've plainly put them in the nominative, and then tell me it isn't nice of me. As if I invented English syntax!"

Evelyn regarded him skeptically. There was just enough of injured appeal in his words to make her doubt her first belief that he was inwardly laughing at her. "How you do wriggle out of things!" she ended, a shade less severely.

Kenji Kato, having gathered up the *go-ban* and the lacquered jars, disappeared within the house. Poole approached Evelyn as she stood at the head of the veranda steps.

"I hope we're not going to quarrel just now, when I'm counting so much on your assistance," he began.

"My assistance?"

"Yes. Isn't there practically a coalition against me to stump me in this affair of the money and the ruby that have disappeared?"

Evelyn studied him closely, the teasing episode instantly forgotten. "Then you *do* suspect some one of playing a trick upon you?"

"Isn't it a fair presumption?" asked Poole.

"And you don't think there was a real burglar?" she persisted, eagerly.

"I don't exactly say that."

They had descended the steps together and were walking along the flower-beds that flanked the side

of the veranda. Evelyn stooped to pick a nasturtium.

"Mr. Poole," she began—her face was turned from him as she bent over the flowers—"suppose it *is* only a hoax that some one in the house has perpetrated—"

"Well?"

"Suppose that person were I?"

"You?" Poole looked down at the golden head and the prettily molded arms and hands that hovered among the nasturtium leaves. "Oh, I'm sure you're not a party to the conspiracy."

"But if I were, wouldn't you be making a bad blunder in enlisting my aid?" She straightened up, facing him with a confident, challenging smile.

"In that case, yes," admitted Poole, slowly, his eyes studying the nasturtium bud she had raised to her lips. "In that case you might doubly outwit me. But—you'll help me, won't you?" he persisted.

"I don't see how I can help you. What is it you want me to do?" Her teeth fretted the stem of the flower still lifted to her lips.

"I only want you to answer a few questions."

"But if it's a game, and I am in it, of course I shall try to deceive you. That's fair, isn't it?"

Poole nodded. "That is my lookout, certainly."

"Then I'll help you," she returned, quickly. "There's my pledge." She slipped the nasturtium through the lapel of his coat and looked up at him with a shy, fleeting smile.

They walked a few steps in silence. The aroma of Poole's cigar drifted agreeably about her. At a

bend in the walk she turned and abruptly confronted him with Archie's theory.

"Has it occurred to you that a real burglary might have coincided with a mock one?"

"There is certainly that possibility," assented Poole. "There is still another—that two mock burglaries, planned independently of each other, have happened to coincide."

"Why, so they might!" Evelyn's eyes were wide upon him. "If it could be that!"

"But to go back to the question of a real theft, which we are by no means through with yet, do you happen to know whether there have been any other burglaries recently in this neighborhood—in the village?"

"I'm sure there haven't. Not in a long time. It would have been reported in the Burwick paper, or I should have heard of it. We never have anything of that kind in Wilton."

"So I imagined. And now as to the servants. Are they all to be trusted? Is there any one of them that has been with you only a short time?"

Evelyn shook her head with decision. "I'm sure there is no one on the premises that I couldn't trust absolutely. All the servants have been with us for years, and they are really attached to us."

"I can readily believe that," agreed Poole.

"Besides, none of the servants could have known about the jewels. There were only Uncle Geoff and Archie and Jack who saw them."

"Not Mrs. Scoville?"

"No. She had left the room before Uncle Geoff brought them out."

"But the money in the safe—you say you were not in the habit of keeping large amounts there?"

"No, and the servants probably know that. You see, there would be no incentive to break into the safe, even supposing that one of them were not honest."

"So we are thrown back on the supposition that an outsider happens along, breaks into the house and into the safe, and is content with twenty dollars and the ruby for his trouble, disdaining the diamonds. I've run across some queer characters in my time, but this particular burglar certainly piques my curiosity." Poole bit his cigar reflectively. "However, there is no good reason why a burglar should not have his eccentricities, just as many law-abiding people have." He paused and looked toward the house. "This, I see, is the library window, and here are the footprints that so interested Colonel Winthrop. We might take a closer look at them."

Poole stooped down and scanned the turf minutely. Taking a sheet of paper from his pocket, he traced upon it the outline of one clear-cut impression in the soft ground where the turf was somewhat thin. Evelyn watched him intently.

"I don't see how that can help you much," she broke in, at length. "There must be thousands of footprints that are the same size and exactly alike."

"Yes, but every print tells something," replied Poole, tapping the ground with his pencil. "Now these marks here indicate a man's foot wearing a shoe, I should say, about size eight—"

"But that doesn't prove anything," persisted Evelyn.

"It proves at least that *you* didn't make it," said Poole, looking up with a laugh. "Suppose you press your foot on the ground here. Thank you. The difference in size is quite apparent, isn't it?" Poole surveyed the trim, narrow outline which Evelyn's sole had made. He proceeded to trace a copy of it upon the other side of his sheet of paper.

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Evelyn.

"Data—merely data," explained Poole. "A detective does very many useless and even foolish things, but one never can tell when some trivial detail may be turned to account. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not, but it seems so absurd," said Evelyn, slowly.

Poole rose to his feet, thrust his hands into his pockets, scanned the library window thoughtfully, and then again the turf. From the ground his glance traveled slowly along the line of the house and to various points about the lawn. "So much for that," he exclaimed with finality.

Evelyn fell into step with him. She had been watching him closely and curiously. "You puzzle me, Mr. Poole," she broke out, frankly.

Poole stopped and looked at her. Then a slow smile crept to his lips, and he observed dryly, "That is probably because I am very much puzzled myself."

"I've discovered one thing about you," replied Evelyn, crisply. "When you look the way you did just now you do *not* mean what you are saying."

Poole laughed. "But I assure you I *am* very much puzzled."

"Then you haven't any theories yet as to this mysterious burglary?"

"Theories? Oh yes, I have theories. What's bothering me chiefly is"—he frowned over the word —"motives. Once a motive is clear, the most stubborn array of contradictory facts will slip into their places in surprising fashion. But this burglar, who has such an aversion to diamonds—oh, is that the bungalow over there?"

Poole nodded toward a low-roofed structure of terra-cotta, partly hidden by a cluster of shrubbery and trees. On the loggia at one end Colonel Winthrop was comfortably ensconced, with his after-breakfast cigar and the morning papers from New York. Just then Jack emerged from the door behind him, arrayed in white flannels and canvas shoes, bare-necked and bare-armed, with a tennis-racket in his hand. Archie was already waiting for him on the court, and in a moment the two were speeding a tennis-ball with lithe-armed strokes back and forth across the net in the preliminary process of "warming up."

"Jack slept in the bungalow last night, I believe," observed Poole, as he stood watching the players.

Evelyn nodded.

"All the others in the house," continued Poole, as if recounting his facts. "You and Archie have rooms on the ground-floor of the house, the butler tells me —Colonel Winthrop, Mrs. Scoville, and myself were installed on the second. Jack alone slept outside."

"I knew that would make you suspect Jack."

"Am I suspecting Jack? Why Jack in particular?" asked Poole.

"Because he was outside the house last night, and the library was entered from the outside."

"But might not some one already *inside* the house have gone outside to enter the library through the window?" queried Poole. "That would be one way of diverting suspicion, and we do not yet know how ingenious a person we have to deal with. However, Jack was the only one who did not sleep in the house."

"Your little Japanese man had one of the rooms in the bungalow," added Evelyn, pointedly.

"So he told me," replied Poole. "Well, I must have a look at the bungalow next."

Just then a ball, wild from Archie's racket, soared over the backstop and bounded toward them. Jack came across the lawn to recapture it.

"Oh, Poole," he called to them, "cut out the sleuthing, and we'll play doubles. Get your racket, Evie."

Evelyn shook her head. "No, I'd rather watch you and Archie. And can't you see that Mr. Poole is awfully busy?"

"Then stop tagging after him and give him a chance to think in peace," was Jack's brotherly rejoinder.

It evoked a prompt sisterly retort, and Poole, laughing, proceeded alone toward the rear of the house, leaving behind him a sprightly war of words.

Colonel Winthrop, having finished his papers, carried them back into the bungalow. After a while he reappeared, and joining Evelyn on the terrace alongside of the court, he watched the tennis-players. Across the net, back and forth over the

oblong stretch of green turf, freshly marked with trim white lines, sped the ball, as the games went alternately to Jack and Archie on service. Then Archie took two in succession, winning the set. The players relinquished for a moment the sun-bathed stretch of court for the terrace and the shade of the elm-trees where Evelyn and her uncle were seated.

"There goes Poole," said Archie, suddenly. A gray-clad figure, oblivious of the group on the terrace, emerged from the bungalow and slowly walked in the direction of the house, his head lowered in meditative study of the ground. They watched him silently for a moment until he disappeared around a corner.

"Say, this is going to be an awful bore," complained Jack, "Poole tied up trying to run down this burglary. And there will be no dragging him away from it; he'll everlastingly hang to it like a bulldog."

"Well, you put him up to it," observed Archie.

"I know, but I didn't stop to think what a lot of nosing round would be in order. Why was he prowling about the bungalow?" demanded Jack, frowning.

"Suspicious of you, of course," said Archie.

"Humph! He'd do much better to watch that Jap of his." Jack turned and prodded Evelyn with his racket. "Get a racket from the bungalow, Sis, and I'll play you both."

"In the bungalow? Let me get it for you," offered Colonel Winthrop.

"Oh, thank you, Uncle, I'll get it." Evelyn sped

away, leaving the Colonel, who had risen to his feet, looking irresolutely after her.

Entering the bungalow, the cool emptiness of the front room greeted her. The walls of terra-cotta brick rose high at both ends of the room until they met the heavy, rough-hewn timbers paneling the roof. The stone fireplace was clean and empty. Rugs were stretched upon the bricks of the floor. From the windows of small latticed panes, opened to the morning breeze, short Dutch curtains fluttered in the sunshine. At each end of the room the bungalow extended backward in two wings, inclosing a sort of patio.

Passing into one of these wings in search of a tennis-racket, Evelyn found herself in Jack's quarters, and paused in disapproving contemplation. The room bore unmistakable testimony to the fact that Jack's change into his tennis clothes had been made with his customary haste and carelessness. Garments were scattered on the bed, and on the table by the window a coat had been hurriedly flung aside. Suit-cases, half rifled of their contents, lay on the floor or usurped the chairs. Evelyn viewed this triumph of masculine disorder, and then a cry escaped her as her eyes noted the coat upon the table. From one of the pockets protruded the jewel-box, which she had given Jack an hour ago. Evidently quite unheeded in his haste, it had almost fallen out. It now lay open on its side, and tumbled forth from it, in the sunlight, glittered the diamonds.

Evelyn caught up the box and recovered one by one the glistening stones that had straggled out of the pocket. "How awfully careless of him!"

She lifted the coat from the table and then stooped to inspect the floor to make certain that none of the stones had escaped her. As a last precaution she lifted the coat, upside down, and gave it a vigorous shake. A brier pipe fell out with a thud; from another pocket came letters and a memorandum-book, and with them something small and red slipped flashing to the floor and rolled away. Evelyn caught her breath, clutching the coat in a sudden access of dismay. On the floor lay the ruby, sparkling in the sunshine and casting a stain of dull crimson light beneath it. She stared at it in consternation, as if it were something baleful and alive which she feared to touch.

There was a slow, measured footstep outside the window. Startled into action, Evelyn sprang forward and snatched up the ruby, slipping it into the box with the diamonds. Then with a hurried, frightened look about her she hastened from the room. In the doorway of the bungalow stood Poole, his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes, his chin, and his cigar lifted abstractedly in an inspection of the raftered ceiling. He seemed startled at her entrance.

"Excuse me. Am I intruding?" he asked. "I thought you were on the tennis-court."

"I only came in to get a tennis-racket, but I seem unable to find any," she explained, uneasily, holding the jewel-box screened from his gaze.

"May I help you hunt?"

There was something in his easy, matter-of-fact tone which disarmed her first suspicion. Assured that she had not been observed in the act of making

her strange discovery, her pulses steadied. But the secret still seemed to tremble in her grasp as she guiltily held the box of jewels behind her. Then it flashed upon her to guard her discovery from him by taking a bold course.

"No, thank you. I'm not going to play tennis; I'm going to scold Jack instead." She held up the jewel-box. "Leaving my diamonds carelessly lying around in his coat pocket!"

"Quite like Jack," Poole commented, as she started to leave the bungalow. "Really, if any of the diamonds should disappear too, I should protest. Are they all there?"

"Oh yes," said Evelyn, quickly, and her fingers tightened upon the box. "And I intend to take them at once to the bank myself, where I can be sure they will be safe."

"If you are driving to the village, might I—" Poole's words were cut short by Evelyn's precipitate call to one of the white-clad figures on the tennis-court.

"Jack!" She held the jewel-box condemningly aloft. Her brother turned between services to look at her. At sight of the box his face clouded.

"I declare, Evie, I quite forgot. I'll take it down to the village after a while."

"No, you won't. You're not to be trusted after leaving them lying around so carelessly," she scolded him from the terrace.

"There! Hang it, Evie! You've made me make a double fault. Put the confounded stones away somewhere, and I'll look after them later. . . . Your game, Archie, thanks to Evie's butting in."

"No, I won't," retorted Evelyn. "I shall take them to the bank myself."

"All right. Get rid of them somehow. They've caused enough trouble for one morning." Jack caught Archie's service with a nimble return, and the diamonds were momentarily forgotten in the series of quick volleys that ensued.

"I say, that's fast work," exclaimed Poole approvingly, as the point went at last to Jack. Evelyn, unmindful of the tennis, was regarding her brother with a perplexed frown. Then she turned abruptly away.

"May I accompany you?" Poole caught up with her, repeating his request. "I've really got to get down to the village this morning, and if you're driving—" He paused as he noted the blank frown which she turned upon him. "Now, what am I guilty of?" he demanded.

Evelyn laughed, and her face lightened. "Nothing. I was still mentally scolding Jack," she explained.

"Then if it wouldn't be boring you—"

Was he not a bit over-eager to accompany her? But there was no time to surmise his motives, much less to fathom them. "Not at all," she responded, amiably. "I'll drive you over in the runabout, if you like."

She did not want his company, but the situation seemed critical, and she was determined not to encourage his suspicion, if he had any, by a show of reluctance. She moved away in the direction of the stable to give orders for the runabout.

"Surely he can't suspect the truth," she tried to

assure herself. In a secluded corner she stole a furtive glance at the ruby and quickly shut the box again; the stone for some reason had become repellent to her sight.

"Is he really suspecting me—or is it my guilty conscience?" she pondered.

CHAPTER V

THEY drove off together in the runabout, Evelyn holding the reins and waving a good-by to the tennis-players with a nonchalant gaiety that belied her real feeling. She was both eager for and afraid of this quarter of an hour alone with Poole while they traversed the mile or two of country road that lay between them and the village. She knew she would have to talk to him, and all the time she must be warily on her guard lest some inkling of her secret escape. But the most casual word—might it not, she asked herself, betray something to this quiet, keen-eyed young man at her side? What might he not know already? Out of the corner of her eyes she ventured a glance at him. Seemingly unmindful of her presence, his hands loosely folded between his knees, he sat absorbedly watching the white ribbon of road slipping fleetly beneath the wheels.

Except for a heightened color in her cheeks, due perhaps to the brisk speed of the runabout, she had outwardly recovered her composure after the disturbing experience of the morning in coming upon the ruby in Jack's clothes. And even that revelation—strangely as her heart had sunk when it first confronted her—was now obscured with doubts and uncertainties. Had Jack really meant to steal the ruby? For some reason the thought was possible

to her. But she beat the question fiercely back in her mind, and always with the vain assumption that the theft would yet prove to be some harmless trickery designed to challenge Poole's ingenuity. Yet the sinister idea would not down; again and again it crept insidiously back into her thoughts. In any case, she dare not let the secret escape to Poole. There was no one, she realized despairingly, whom she could intrust at this juncture with the startling fact that the ruby, with the diamonds, was once more safely reposing in the jewel-box at her side. She recoiled even from the thought of telling Jack. Devious as was the course she was now pursuing, she must await the outcome, though she could not contemplate that possible outcome without an uneasy, instinctive dread.

In the mean time the truth of the whole affair—of which she now held a tangible part—was the immediate quest of the taciturn young man at her side. She regarded the intricate task, the piecing together of meager, puzzling bits of fact—it seemed incredible that any one could achieve it; that Poole could gain even that partial knowledge which she herself had come upon unwittingly and now guarded from him. Yet stranger and more elusive mysteries had been solved by other men, and who could tell what Poole might be capable of? She recalled the footsteps outside the bungalow when she had stood staring at the ruby on the floor—he had walked past the window—and then his unaffected surprise when she had come out suddenly from Jack's room. Had he, indeed, made quite unsuspectingly that last detour of the bungalow? If she could but feel sure that

her manner at that moment had told him nothing! But her doubt on that point was hopeless. It was impossible to divine what thoughts were screened behind those gray eyes which at times probed hers so keenly.

She remembered uneasily that Poole had gone into the bungalow himself before her own visit there. Had he by any chance come upon the ruby? The thought that he could have searched Jack's clothes was instantly repugnant to her, and she dismissed it. If he had entered Jack's room a close look might have noted the jewel-box half tumbled from the pocket. But the diamonds and the jewel-box were not in themselves suspicious. Poole had seen her give them over to Jack in the library.

As they drove along in continued silence a shivering fear seized her lest he might make some new inquiry about the jewels, lest he might ask again to see the box. It lay now in her bag on the seat between them, almost under his hand.

"How stupid of me to put the ruby back in the box!" she thought, regretfully. "If he even begins to talk about the diamonds I know I shall give everything away. I must divert his thoughts elsewhere — somehow." And yet in a way she was timidly eager to have him broach the subject, that she might gain some idea of his theory of the affair and learn the direction in which his suspicions were pointing.

As the rubber-tired wheels bowled smoothly along to the accompaniment of measured hoofbeats, Evelyn stole another furtive look at her companion. His panama hat was drawn low over his forehead,

his gaze was still contemplatively upon the spinning wheel of the runabout, and the white road beneath. Then she ventured a bolder inspection of his person —a slender but lithe and muscular form clad in well-tailored gray flannels. His hands, finely shaped and now relaxed upon his knees, seemed capable of instant and vigorous action. A gold seal-ring upon one of his fingers was the single adornment he wore; Evelyn's eye lingered upon its curious design. Then she glanced up again at his face to make certain that her slanting scrutiny of him had not been observed. She rather liked the clean-cut profile of the nose and lips, the aggressive contour of his chin. She experienced a curious feeling of attraction toward him, mingled with something akin to awe. She could not regard him simply as a healthy, good-looking young man of twenty-seven or eight, with easy, cultivated manners. Other qualities and forces seemed to be latent in him which she could in no way define—a man of depths, evidently, difficult to understand. In his present rôle—perhaps because of it—everything about him seemed to her in some way enigmatical.

"I *must* say something," Evelyn remonstrated to herself, fearful lest her prolonged silence might be construed as suspicious. She darted another quick look at him.

Poole, still intent upon the wheel below him, withdrew his cigar from his lips.

"That is the third inspection you have subjected me to, Miss Winthrop," he observed without looking up.

Evelyn, taken by surprise, crimsoned. The runabout sped onward a few yards in silence.

"I dare say as an amateur detective I am something of a curiosity," Poole soliloquized with amusement, but Evelyn cut him short.

"How many eyes have you got?" she demanded.

"Two—like yourself."

"Then how did you know I was—"

"Looking me up and down?"

"Well, if you put it that way," Evelyn yielded the point.

Poole pointed with his cigar to the polished surface of the dashboard in front of them, in which both their faces were not obscurely reflected. "Surely you are not unaware of that very passable substitute for a mirror."

"Then you were watching me!" she exclaimed, mildly disapproving.

"More exactly, I was watching you watching me," said Poole. Their eyes met, but this time not in the polished depths of the dashboard.

As she again turned with a laugh to the management of the horse, his gaze lingered upon her.

The sudden flare of color was ebbing from her cheeks. Above the curving line of her neck, from which her golden-brown hair was caught up and massed, one truant lock flaunted jauntily free. Her blue eyes were now intent upon the road ahead. There was a challenging lift to her chin, which the soft curves of her mouth endeavored to deny, and her nose, with its slight, bewitching tilt, tried to reassert. It was an engaging profile. Poole's scrutinizing glance had become one of admiration. He noted the clear glow under the faint, even tan of her skin, both of her face and neck and of the rounded

forearms that showed bare above the long driving-gloves. While he allowed his gaze to linger on her approvingly, she had piqued his interest in still another way: "I wonder why she is afraid of me?" he asked himself, and relapsed again into a brown study of the carriage-wheel.

Evelyn broke the silence somewhat abruptly. "I know I'm awfully curious, Mr. Poole, but is it about the—the ruby—that you are going to the village?"

Poole nodded. "The ruby *and* the stolen money. You mustn't ignore the money."

"But it was only twenty dollars."

"True, but you see it's not the amount that is significant in this case. It's the fact that it was taken. Naturally, you are more concerned in recovering the ruby."

"Oh yes," said Evelyn nervously, and she veered from the subject. "I suppose your mission in Wilton is dreadfully mysterious and important, and I mustn't know anything about it. Shall I drop you somewhere? And where shall I pick you up after I've been to the bank?" They were approaching the outskirts of the village, and some expedient was necessary so that she might accomplish her errand alone.

Poole paused to consider. "If you don't mind, I'll go with you as far as the bank," he decided.

Evelyn pressed her lips together. "He can't really mean to be spying on me," she told herself uneasily.

On both sides of the street, into which the road had now widened, substantial-looking, old-fashioned

houses, white with green shutters, were set back sedately under double rows of tall New England elms. It was a quaint and quiet stretch of village street, which soon opened to the more pretentious expanse of the village square. The church and the town hall faced each other across the stretch of green. Adjacent to the latter, and presenting a somewhat incongruous and modern air, stood a two-story building of brick. Upon the large glass windows, in gilt letters, were the words "Wilton National Bank."

A loiterer or two along the sidwalk looked curiously at the couple as they descended from the runabout. More precisely, their glances were directed at Poole, who was a stranger to them. Mr. Ogilvie, the cashier of the bank, had caught sight of Evelyn and had come out from behind the barred glass partition of the tellers' quarters. He greeted her suavely. Mr. Ogilvie was city-bred, a bachelor of forty-five, and assiduously alert to the interests of the bank. To him Evelyn was not only the most charming girl in Wilton; to his sagacious intellect she denoted the "Winthrop estate," in which the Wilton National Bank was very much interested. Evelyn introduced Poole to the cashier, who ushered them into the seclusion of the imposing back room which once a month served the directors of the bank as a meeting-place, and into which, at other times, were admitted important customers who might require a moment's privacy.

"I want to put something in my safety-deposit box," explained Evelyn, fumbling in her bag for a key. She had not counted on Poole's entering the bank with her, but she had been quite unable to

deflect him elsewhere. Apparently regarding her errand as a perfunctory task of the moment, he had not scrupled to follow her; his back was now turned to her across the room as he studied an old steel-engraving upon the wall.

"Very well, Miss Winthrop, will you step this way? And Mr. Poole," the cashier looked inquiringly at the other, "you might be interested in seeing our new equipment."

It happened that the Wilton National Bank had recently installed modern burglar-proof vaults, equipped with time-locks, elaborate steel doors, and other appliances devised to safeguard hoarded wealth. This innovation had marked an epoch in the history of the village, much to the satisfaction of Mr. Ogilvie, who had accomplished it. He was enormously proud of the formidable gray-painted steel and the bright nickeled mechanism of the vaults, and was eager to exhibit them on every occasion. He was pleased to find Poole duly impressed. The latter held Mr. Ogilvie with a random question or two while Evelyn brought forth the jewel-box from her bag. The cashier, still rehearsing over his shoulder to Poole the wonders of the mechanism, inserted the bank's key into one of the two locks of Evelyn's safety-deposit box. Evelyn had hoped for at least this moment alone, but there was no help for it. She slipped the jewel-box inside and relocked the little steel door. Poole, a dozen steps away, was admiringly contemplating the delicate construction of the time-lock upon the massive door of the vault. Presently the trio returned to the corridor outside the ground-glass partitions.

"Can I do anything further for you this morning, Miss Winthrop?" asked Mr. Ogilvie. "Well, another time. Charmed to have met you, Mr. Poole. You must drop in again."

Once more outside the bank, Poole assisted Evelyn into the runabout. He himself remained standing on the sidewalk. "Can I do anything further for you this morning?" he mimicked the unctuous tones of Mr. Ogilvie.

Evelyn laughed. "Then I am to abandon you here?" she asked, somewhat reluctantly.

"Yes, I must have a look round," was Poole's uninforming reply.

She gathered up the reins. "And when and where, please, am I to pick you up again?"

"Oh, you mustn't think of waiting for me." Poole lifted his hat, smiling his slow smile. "And won't you make apologies for me at the house—I fear I shall not get back until after luncheon."

Evelyn looked at him in surprise. She seemed about to offer some protest, but withheld it. Then, as she gathered up the reins, her smile broke full upon him. "Don't get lost in Wilton," she conjured lightly, and drove off.

It seemed, as she returned slowly homeward, that somehow they had become much better acquainted during that brief ride together. And yet practically nothing had been said. It vaguely puzzled her.

CHAPTER VI

MONTGOMERY POOLE, on the sidewalk in front of the Wilton National Bank, watched the runabout until it turned the corner of the village square and was lost to view. Then he lighted a cigar, cast an appraising look about him, and giving a tug to his panama, which brought it well down over his eyes, he sauntered off. For an hour or more he loitered in seeming aimlessness about the village. Entering the post-office, he bought some stamps, and fell to chatting with the postmaster. At the adjoining store, where a knot of men were engaged in watching a game of checkers and discussing local politics, Poole entered on the pretext of purchasing cigars. He made a halting selection from a showcase in which dubious "clear Havana" and "Key West" products were gathering dust and dryness, turned to watch the progress of the checker game, and with an incidental but adroit word or two joined the circle of talk. When this presently drifted into the channel of village gossip he listened attentively. From the grocery store he ventured in on a real-estate agent who found time heavy on his hands in a dingy little one-room office. Poole produced some of his recently purchased cigars, and inquired about farming-lands in the vicinity. The real-estate man was verging on seventy years, and proved to be a

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veritable gazetteer and biographical dictionary of the township. Poole smoked and listened. As a result of two hours' patient attention he amassed a very considerable knowledge of the village and its eight hundred inhabitants.

After leaving the real-estate office Poole paused uncertainly on the sidewalk. Across the square, and on the further corner, he scanned a rambling frame structure, painted a dingy white, with long rows of windows fitted with green shutters. There were a number of chairs extending in a row on each side of the entrance, indicating that the place was a hostelry of some sort. As Poole approached the corner he caught sight of the words—"New Windsor Hotel." The sign-board was dilapidated and bore evidence of having weathered through many seasons. Poole crossed the street and entered the hotel.

Within were more chairs of the same pattern as those invitingly disposed on the sidewalk. A counter, or "desk," cut off one portion of the room; behind it stood a large iron safe, and on the neighboring walls was displayed a medley of placards and vari-colored posters. The transient guest might here learn that the county fair was to be held at Burwick on September 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th; that the Massachusetts Central R.R. now offered weekly excursions to Niagara Falls and return at a greatly reduced fare. There was a flaming but obsolete circus poster, reminiscent of a past gala-day, and in more quiet tones a colored lithograph depicting a caribou-hunt in the Maine woods. On the marble-topped counter lay the hotel register and a ponderous railroad "guide," and at one end a glass cigar show-

case. For the moment the inclosure behind the counter was deserted.

Poole glanced indifferently about the empty room, and entered the bar, where he found the hotel clerk, idling in conversation with the bartender. Both looked up curiously at the new-comer, who walked over to one of the small round tables with which the room was furnished. It was a somewhat dingy and ill-lighted interior, owing to the fact that the lower half of the windows which gave on the street were coated with yellow paint. On the smoke-begrimed walls were other posters and lithographs similar to those displayed in the hotel office, but here they were reduced to a position of insignificance by the obtrusive presence of a gilt-framed painting that hung above the bar. In sharp distinction from the commercial air of the posters and lithographs, the intent of this canvas was manifestly artistic, portraying, as it did, a study in the nude.

The clerk departed abruptly to the office, and the bartender, a heavy and sodden-featured man of middle-age, who was manifesting a tendency to grow unduly stout, resumed his lethargic task of wiping the surface of the bar with a towel.

"Have you any ale on draught?" asked Poole from his table.

"Only lager," answered the bartender, pausing in his operations with the towel. "Can give you bottled ale, sir."

Poole nodded assent, and the bartender's head disappeared below the counter whence came the clinking of bottles being shifted about.

"Things seem very quiet with you this morning,"

observed Poole, when the proper bottle had been brought to the table and its foaming brown contents were being poured into a glass.

"There's never any trade this time o' day," explained the bartender. He watched Poole sip the ale. "Not very cold, I guess," he ventured, half apologetically. The ale was somewhat warm, and tasted flat.

"Stranger in town?" pursued the bartender, lingering at the table, towel in hand. Poole nodded. "But you're not stopping here?" continued the other. Poole acknowledged that he was not.

"I thought I hadn't seen you around before," concluded the questioner. "Have some cheese and crackers with that ale?"

Poole declined the proffered hospitality. "This place is pretty old, isn't it?" he queried, his eye wandering about the room and noting the many old-fashioned details of its decrepit furnishings.

The bartender shrugged his shoulders. "Been here twenty-two years myself, come next January, and it wa'n't anything like new then."

"Indeed!" said Poole.

"'Twa'n't more'n a road-house when I first come here, and even now—on Saturday nights—" the man shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Don't you get a good class of trade?"

"Well, you see, this is the only bar in the village, so we get all classes and have to take 'em. Saturday nights sometimes are a little lively if a road-gang happens to come in over Sunday, you know."

Poole nodded. "Still, I should say in a village of this size you don't really have any tough element."

"No, it's too slow for 'em. There's nothin' to draw 'em to Wilton—no movin'-picture shows, or nothin'."

"I see," said Poole. He drew a bill from his pocket in payment for his drink. The bartender eyed it dubiously.

"Might you have anythin' smaller 'n that?" he suggested. "The till is all out of change. Joe Spurling come in early this morning and got change for a brand-new fifty."

"A fifty?" echoed Poole. "Do you get many bills that size?"

"No, sir, and I guess Joe Spurling don't get 'em often either," said the other, with a laugh.

Poole's cigar broke into a sudden glow. "What do you mean?" he asked; his eyes narrowed thoughtfully upon the bartender.

The bartender shifted awkwardly. "Why, Joe's all right, but he's kind o' shiftless, you know. Only works by fits and spells, and most o' the time he's pretty well down and out—like his father, only they say that old man Spurling's got a lot of money tucked away somewheres. Heard o' old man Spurling?"

Poole shook his head.

"Well, he's something of a character round here. Queer un. Keeps to himself off in the woods. He's got a shack up on Prescott Ridge—guess you don't know Prescott Ridge either. It lies over to the west of the village—back of the Winthrops' place. Maybe you've noticed the big house about a mile and a half out yonder"—the bartender pointed—"on the right side of the road settin' back and high up, with big grounds around it."

"I think I know the place," answered Poole.

"Well, Prescott is the ridge just back of the Winthrops'. They call it the Saddle-back, where the road goes over to Burwick. Old Spurling has lived up there by himself for years. Never would have anything to do with other folks. Some people says he's crazy, but I dunno. An' there's some that says he's got a lot of money tucked away somewheres. Mebbe Joe got that fifty from the old man, but 'tain't likely. He and the old man never got along much together neither."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Who? The old man?"

"No; the boy, Joe."

"Oh, Joe was off in a great rush to get the eight-ten train for Boston."

"Then he has quit work around here?" pursued Poole.

The bartender shrugged his shoulders. "Can't say. Don't know as he was doin' anything lately. He had a good job in a machine shop over in Burwick, but he quit that more'n a month ago. Queer fellow, Joe, but smart, though."

"Perhaps he's got something better—in Boston," ventured Poole.

The bartender smiled. "'Tain't likely Joe 'd be rushin' off to Boston to go to work. Most likely it's just one o' his queer streaks. He'll be turnin' up again before long, when his money's gone."

Poole set down his glass. "I'm rather curious to see this old chap Spurling, if he can be found."

"I guess you can find him most any day up on Prescott. You follow the main road that leads out

past the Winthrops', but you turn off at Miller's Forks. That takes you up over the Saddle-back, and if you look sharp you can pick up the old man's trail where it turns off into the woods. He's got a shack up there, and is usually roamin' around."

"Thanks," said Poole, rising to his feet and stretching himself, "I may take a notion to hunt him up some day when I've nothing better to do."

"Goin' to be round here long?"

"I'm inclined to think that I shall," answered Poole.

"Good day, sir," said the bartender, as Poole departed; and after removing from the table the half-empty bottle and glass he retreated to the bar, where he resumed his listless operations with the towel.

CHAPTER VII

TWO hours later Montgomery Poole was climbing the steep, winding road which led to the Saddleback. Nearing the summit, he paused to look back at the panorama of the valley that now lay spread out beneath him, the village a mere cluster of tiny white houses in the distance. To the right, and far below him, glittered the level surface of a lake, surrounded by dense masses of woodland descending gradually in great billows of green quite to the grounds about the Winthrop house. Poole could distinguish the figure of a groom moving about near the stables. The lawns seemed deserted.

The smoke from his cigar, for the moment motionless in his hand, streamed thinly upward in the still air, while his eye roved over the landscape and at last with a thoughtful frown became fixed upon the distant house. In the languor and stillness of noon the old mansion seemed brooding, undisturbed by the mystery locked within its walls.

Deep in reverie, Poole's gaze rested upon the quaint, rambling structure and the trim lawns that stretched in all directions from it, starred with flower-beds which Poole discerned only as bright flecks of color upon a velvet patch of green. The ancient gables that rose above the embowering trees seemed aging in tranquil dignity, unmindful of the

ceaseless round of July suns and winter storms. The ash dropped softly from Poole's cigar as it still hung motionless in his fingers. As if abruptly recalled to himself, he wheeled about and scanned the road he had still to traverse. A little way ahead he made out the faintly worn path that turned and was immediately lost in the gloom of the thick trees.

"So that is it," he mused, half aloud. "I wonder if old Spurling will be glad to see me?"

He started into the woods, following the hint of pathway and picking his way carefully over fallen logs and through the thick underbrush that beset him. He advanced for some distance with deft, cautious steps until he presently paused, uncertain of his further course, for the path seemed wholly lost. Just then came a sharp report, and with a dull concussion a bullet flattened itself against the trunk of a tree a foot or two above his head.

Poole's eyebrows lifted with a start. Instinctively he turned to look up at the scar of the bullet upon the oak, and immediately his pulses steadied.

"Hm-m! Since there seems no other path to follow, it may be as well to follow the path of the bullet," he reflected. He struck forth boldly through the underbrush in the direction from which the shot had come.

For a hundred yards he advanced rapidly, with a sharp eye on all sides, but his assailant had vanished. Poole paused to listen, but no sound betrayed the flight or presence of the marksman. Meanwhile, however, he had again chanced upon the path, which now offered an easier progress. A few minutes' walk brought him to a gash in the crest of the hill, and

across this ravine-like depression he saw a small, roughly built cabin, in the doorway of which sat a stalwart, uncouth man with long, unkempt gray hair. He was dressed in woodsman's clothes, and drowsily pulled at a pipe, his gaze vacantly upon the open stretch of valley beneath him.

Poole quietly skirted the gully and advanced to the cleared space before the cabin.

"Good afternoon," said Poole.

The old man shifted his heavy boots and mumbled some response. He eyed the new-comer sourly.

"Mr. Spurling, I believe," continued Poole. With instinctive quickness his eye took in the details of the place at a glance.

"There's a seat if that's what you're lookin' for," grunted the other.

"Thanks, if I'm not intruding." Poole settled himself upon the indicated log.

"No intrusion—Mr. Poole."

For an instant Poole's eyes narrowed sharply upon the old man. "Oh, then you know my name," he went on, easily. "I was about to tell you that."

"If you'll be tellin' me your business up here instead," tartly interrupted Spurling.

"For one thing I wanted to inquire if there's much hunting in these woods." Poole picked up the rifle that leaned against the log and examined it casually.

"Mebbe a partridge now and then," said Spurling.

"Some one in the woods just now narrowly missed hitting me."

"You don't say! Come to think on't, I did hearn a shot."

"That's a good gun," said Poole, bringing it to

his shoulder, and squinting down the polished barrel. "You could nip off a leaf at fifty yards, I dare say."

"Nothin' easier," assented the old man, disdainfully. "At a hundred."

"Just so," said Poole. "I knew you didn't intend to hit me."

"Hit you! What vou talkin' about?" demanded Spurling, angrily.

"Why, the shot that lodged in the tree above my head ten minutes ago."

"Roarin' blazes!" Spurling grew belligerent. "I jest told you I hearn a shot, but if you think—"

"I don't think. It's too obvious," cut in Poole. "Look at this powder-stained barrel. This gun has been discharged within the last quarter of an hour. During that time there's been just one shot fired in these woods. As this is the gun, I infer that you did the shooting, and from the bullet-hole in the tree I judge that you couldn't have been more than fifty yards away. At that distance you wouldn't have missed me; you admit you're a good shot. I take it that you hit just where you planned to hit—that is, a spot on a tree two feet above my head. Now, what for?" Poole demanded.

Spurling took the pipe from his mouth and spat deliberately upon the ground.

"Seems to me, Mr. Poole, since you're so all-fired smart as to figger out that much, mebbe you c'n figger out the rest." He relapsed enigmatically into contemplation of his pipe.

Poole regarded him for a moment, and then laughed. "I guess you have me there, after all."

"Jest as you say. Jest as you say," retorted the

old man, but there was a shrewd glimmer in his eyes, and his tone was a trifle less sour. If Poole had failed to break down Spurling's guard by the abruptness of his onslaught, he judged that he had at least gained a point in acknowledging this momentary defeat. The old fellow was in distinctly better humor.

"He's a crafty cove," Poole inwardly commented. He sensed in old Spurling, once aroused, a formiable antagonist, and he cast about for some indirection whereby he might effect a truce between them. Any inkling of the real purpose of his mission he now warily withheld. Throwing away his cigar, he turned to inspect the woodland about him and the broad stretch of the valley below.

"These woods have never been lumbered," he observed.

Spurling, vouchsafing no reply, puffed silently at his pipe, while his visitor made a cursory inspection of the near-by trees. Poole strolled off to some little distance, tearing off a bit of bark here, pausing now and then to note and to appraise the girth and growth of the trunks. When he came back toward Spurling's cabin, where the old man still sat apparently indifferent to his movements, he passed with only an abrupt word of farewell.

"I say," Spurling called out after him. "Be you a-thinkin' of buyin' this 'ere land?"

"Good! The old fellow has curiosity," Poole noted, mentally. He halted and looked back casually. "What's that you said?"

"I asked, be you thinkin' of buyin' this 'ere land?"

"Well, there's some such project afoot," assented

Poole, vaguely. "It's a question of whether there's enough of this white pine to make it worth while taking out. It's the only wood I see here that's worth going after."

Old Spurling got to his feet and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"So ye be in the lumberin' business, eh?"

"If you know who I am, you don't have to ask that," answered Poole. "Perhaps you can tell me —how does the white pine run on that next slope? Thicker on the elevations, I imagine, where it has crowded out the birch."

"You're right, there," agreed Spurling, visibly impressed. "There's a heap sight more pine on t'other side of the ridge next the Winthrops' place."

"Yes, I know, but on this side it would be much easier to take out and transport to Burwick. You see that's to be considered."

The old man reflected. "There was a couple of chaps prospectin' through here last summer," he volunteered, "as said about that. So you'd be drivin' me out of here, eh?" Spurling's tone grew suddenly malevolent.

Poole shrugged his shoulders. "It's not for me to say, Mr. Spurling."

"Me as has lived here all my life," the old man went on, wrathfully, "on land that belonged to my grandpop, and should be mine by rights."

"Yours—this land?" queried Poole.

"Well, I mean that on t'other side, that's in Winthrop's hands now. Is it that young scamp Winthrop put ye up to this?"

"Winthrop—you mean Jack Winthrop?"

"That's what they call him."

"Why, I'm up here at his invitation," assented Poole, avoiding the question.

"Huh!" Spurling spat again in disgust. "They did my grandpop out of that land, and now that young whelp's schemin' to buy up and drive me off'n this. Land that should be mine by rights, and my son's after me!"

Poole's eyebrow lifted. "You have a son, then?" he inquired.

"I have, that. And he's not the bad egg that young Jack Winthrop is!" The old man was now boiling spitefully.

"Not the bad egg that young Jack Winthrop is," repeated Poole. "I don't understand."

The man of the woods fell abruptly silent. "'Tain't necessary that you should," he said, curtly, but with lessened vehemence, and wheeled about.

Poole studied the retreating back. He was tempted to venture another question, but he forbore. The old man, without looking round once, disappeared within his cabin and shut the door. Poole at last turned away.

"So Joe Spurling is not the bad egg that young Jack Winthrop is," he repeated to himself, musingly. Slowly he threaded the path leading back to the road. Presently he paused, in a brown study.

"He didn't mean to let that slip out. I wonder why."

CHAPTER VIII

THE sun was well toward the west and the afternoon shadows were beginning to lengthen when Poole left the woods and came out upon the road by which he had climbed to the Saddle-back. He paused again to survey the beauty of the valley lying green and golden in the afternoon haze, the dark masses of the woodland here and there checkering the softer greens of field and meadow. The railroad, a thin ribbon of steel, wound in sinuous curves in the distance.

Poole studied the landscape, mentally laying a route homeward in cross-country fashion. A glance at his watch told him that it was nearly four o'clock. He began leisurely to descend.

As he approached the house he could see the Winthrop family assembled on the lawn under the trees, where a hammock and chairs were invitingly placed and where a table had been spread for afternoon tea. Poole came leisurely across the lawn from the rear, and his unannounced appearance brought an exclamation of surprise from the group.

"Hullo! Where did you drop from?" demanded Jack, ensconced cross-legged on the grass, still arrayed in his tennis negligée of the morning. Colonel Winthrop looked up from a book he was reading, and removed his eye-glasses to inspect Poole.

"You're in time for tea, anyhow," announced Archie, about to stretch himself in the hammock, where Evelyn was arranging pillows for him. "Where in thunder have you been?"

"I've had something of a tramp," answered Poole, evasively.

"You look as if you'd been lost for a week," said Jack, eying him with some curiosity. "Find Evelyn's ruby in your rambles?"

"If Miss Winthrop expected that I would"—Poole looked across at her—"I'm sorry to disappoint her—for the present."

Evelyn gave a little startled look at Poole from the pillow she was placing in the hammock, when Archie broke out in protest at her arrangement of the cushions.

"Oh, bother! Evie, you know I can't lie on my right side."

"How fussy you are!" Evelyn obediently shifted the pillows to the other end of the hammock, glad for the moment's diversion which enabled her to avoid Poole's glance.

Poole sat down in a chair and stretched out his legs, thoughtfully regarding the dust upon his shoes.

"Any clues?" quizzed Colonel Winthrop.

Poole gave a little shrug of his shoulders. He looked from one to another of the group, who, with the exception of Evelyn, were watching him expectantly. "The committee reports progress—isn't that the formula?" he laughed.

"There's no pumping him," was Jack's blunt comment. "I'd like to know, though, how you got here without coming up the road."

"I came through the woods," explained Poole.

"Through the woods!" echoed Evelyn.

"Yes. I—I got lost in Wilton."

There was a momentary look of bewilderment in Evelyn's eyes, and then an answering flash of amusement as she recalled her parting words to him in the morning. She laughed lightly.

"Got lost in Wilton! What's up between you two?" Jack demanded suspiciously of Evelyn.

"Nothing, silly," chided his sister.

"The plot thickens," was Archie's lazy comment from the comfortable depths of the hammock.

Grimes's appearance with a pot of hot water required Evelyn's attention at the tea-table where Poole sat. She crossed toward him.

"Tell me, aren't you famished? Did you get any lunch?"

"Not merely lunch, but a feast," Poole reassured her.

Evelyn's look was skeptical.

"Three cigars and an apple pie," he particularized, "at the railroad-station. And now tell me, what has happened here in the mean time?"

"Uncle Geoff has been rummaging the library for detective novels."

"I noticed as I came up that he was reading *The Moonstone*. Still I don't regard that as a particularly suspicious act."

"Suspicious!" Evelyn set down the teapot and confronted Poole. Of course not! Did you think I thought it was? The idea never occurred to me."

"Well, if it should occur to you that anything looked suspicious, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

Evelyn judicially appraised the young man at her side. "Maybe," she answered, slowly.

"I am sure you would," said Poole.

"How confident you are!" There was a flash of rebellion in Evelyn's eyes. "And do you expect the others are going to be equally obliging?"

"I don't know about the others," confessed Poole. "You are the only one I can depend upon. But I am going to succeed in this affair—"

"With or without?" interrupted Evelyn.

"*With* you, I hope."

"I meant sugar—in your tea."

"I meant you—your assistance, since you are the only one I can trust." Poole leaned forward, speaking low and earnestly. "But the same answer will do for the tea."

Evelyn regarded him a moment.

"With or without?" she repeated.

"With," said Poole.

Evelyn lifted the sugar-tongs. "One or two?"

"One," said Poole, significantly.

Evelyn dropped the white oblong of sugar into the tea, and, leaning over the cup, studied it intently. There was a trace of color in her cheeks.

In the evening after dinner, and after an hour or two had been whiled away over the bridge table, Colonel Winthrop pleaded a headache, and the little company broke up earlier than usual. Jack followed Poole into the library, a frown of displeasure on his face.

"Well, Jack, you're looking as glum as an Indian.

Out with it." Poole sat down at the desk and contemplated the lengthening ash upon his cigar.

Jack dropped into a chair and stretched out his legs. With hands thrust deep into his pockets, he looked at Poole dubiously. "It's about this—this affair," he began, tentatively.

"Yes? What about it?" Poole tilted back in the chair and began idly blowing smoke-rings.

"I didn't realize what a bore it would mean for you when I put the job up to you this morning."

"But, Jack, I'm not in the least bored. On the contrary, this problem begins to interest me immensely."

"I don't make head or tail of it myself," said Jack, glumly.

"Well, I don't either—just yet," agreed Poole.

Jack shifted his feet impatiently, and a frown wrinkled his forehead. "But it's going to be an infernal nuisance, and take up a lot of your time, and make no end of bother for you," he persisted. "I hate to think I've dragged you up here only to put you to work—"

Poole laughed. "I shouldn't call it work. Mind you, I'm only *playing* detective—"

"But you're making anything but play out of it," objected Jack. "Already you're as confoundedly close and serious about it as if it were a matter of life and death."

"Robbery is a serious matter," said Poole, quietly.

"But was it a robbery?" queried Jack, again frowning.

Poole studied his cigar and its lengthening ash. "That remains to be seen," he replied, after a mo-

ment's silence. "Of course, there's first of all the question of motive to be considered. The motive behind the taking of this money—and the ruby—makes all the difference in the world. But frankly, Jack," Poole went on, as the boy remained moodily silent, "I don't anticipate working overtime on this affair. To-day naturally had to be an exception. I had to get over a lot of preliminary ground, so to speak—get my bearings, you know. But the problem"—Poole again regarded the ash on his cigar—"the problem has already begun to assume certain clean-cut limitations in my mind; and while I venture to repeat what I instinctively felt this morning, that this is not a matter that can be unriddled 'before breakfast,' as the Japanese say, still, unless something unexpected turns up, I sha'n't be giving more than an occasional odd hour to it. Anyhow, if I don't make something out of it in the course of a week or so I'll chuck it outright and own myself beaten. You'll stand for that, won't you?"

Jack's face visibly brightened. "Of course. But I had visions of you vanishing from morning to night—"

Poole shook his head and smiled. "Most of my cogitating might be done right in this library. And by the way, could I make this room a sort of headquarters?"

A puzzled expression crossed Jack's face, but he nodded a careless assent. "Any room you like, Poole."

"Thanks. If I can have an uninterrupted hour here now and then—"

"Why, of course! We'll put a sign on the door—'Montgomery Poole, Secret Agent, strictly Private—'"

"Then I am quite ready to join you in anything you may plan." Poole inspected again the ash on his cigar, which had grown to a perilous length. Now he poised it over the ash-tray and held it expectantly. A moment later the ash fell of its own weight, bringing a murmur of surprise from Jack at the closely timed manœuver.

"If you stick to one brand of tobacco you come to know its habits," said Poole. He leaned back in his chair, surveying the many rows of books which lined the walls.

"Your father, Jack, must have been something of a student."

"Oh, Dad knew something about everything," said Jack, with a despairing glance at the shelves. "He was particularly keen on mineralogy, geology, and a lot of those things. And—oh yes—chemistry. There's a full-rigged laboratory out in the bungalow. Did you notice it?"

"Yes, I stumbled upon it this morning. By the way, Jack, is there anything of a private nature in those papers in the safe? It's merely routine, but I ought to examine them."

"Go as far as you like, Poole. It's nothing but trash. We'll have them out now, if you say," replied Jack, with alacrity.

The dusty and yellowed papers were soon spread upon the desk. They proved to be valueless and of no significance—expired tenants' leases, old receipts, bits of memoranda concerning the estate. As Jack

was returning them to the safe Poole's eyes caught sight of several bound manuscript volumes upon one of the bookshelves.

"Did your father write, too?"

"Oh, those?" Jack turned about, brushing the dust from his hands. "That was another of Dad's hobbies. Those books are full of old Hindu legends, folk-lore stories, and that sort of truck. Dad spent a good many years collecting them from all sorts of sources and copying them down. You might be interested in looking them over. Some of the yarns are not bad reading—queer Eastern stuff, you know, and as old as the hills. How about motoring over to Burwick to-morrow for lunch? It's a beautiful ride across Prescott Ridge, and the car will hold all of us, I guess. If not, Archie and Evie can go saddle-back."

"I should enjoy it."

"You're on, then."

"By the way, Jack, if you don't mind my asking, is your sister—engaged to your cousin?"

Jack turned at the doorway and shrugged his shoulders. "Give it up, Poole. You'll have to ask them. I suppose they'll hit it off some day. They've never had eyes for anybody but each other. Well, good night."

Alone in the library, Poole resumed his survey of the bookshelves. He turned here and there, his eye skimming over familiar and unfamiliar titles. Presently he paused before a little framed picture on the wall—a photograph of Evelyn, taken some years before, in which she laughingly faced the camera from a pony-cart. Poole studied the face

for a moment and turned again to the shelves. Finally he took down one of the manuscript volumes of Mr. Winthrop and opened it. For a little while he read standing, then sat down at the table, taking the ponderous volume with him. The minutes slipped past. He had become deeply engrossed in the book. In the brass tray beside him the ashes accumulated in a slowly rising pile. . . .

"May one interrupt—to say good night?"

Poole looked up to find Evelyn at the curtains of the doorway regarding him doubtfully. The desk-clock at Poole's elbow pointed to half after eleven.

"I say," he recovered himself, pushing the book from him, "I had no idea it was so late. Come in, won't you?" He was on his feet.

Evelyn, balancing on her toes at the doorway and drawing the curtains together until they half framed her face between the heavy folds, shook her head in a resolute negative.

"I'm disturbing the great detective," she added in a melodramatic whisper, "deep in the midst of plots and stratagems—"

Poole, contemplating the pretty, teasing face between the curtains, experienced a vague thrill. The house was silent and dark save for the circle of light in which he stood. From somewhere out of the obscure depths of the hall came the single deep chime of the half-hour.

"'Tis now the very witching time of night," quoted Evelyn in a stage whisper, her blue eyes wide with mock solemnity upon Poole.

"Nonsense! It lacks half an hour of being that. Do come in," he pleaded.

The curtains fell again to their accustomed place, but Evelyn remained obdurate in the doorway. "Jack said this room was to be horribly private. I don't dare venture an inch," and she looked down at her feet which just touched the line of the door-sill.

"So the mandate has gone forth, has it?" queried Poole, reflectively. "Well, if Jack's word is the law, I suppose that ends it."

One slippered foot was promptly thrust across the door-sill in defiance of the law. The other presently followed.

"You keep very late hours, and I know you smoke too much," said Evelyn, eying disapprovingly the cluttered ash-tray at his elbow.

"I'm afraid I do," agreed Poole, humbly. It was a new experience to be mildly taken to task in this fashion for his pet vice, and he rather liked it.

"Then why do you do it?"

"I suppose it's because I've never been told not to."

"What a stupid reason!"

"Well, I'm a bit slow at seeing some things for myself."

"Jack says you are as quick as lightning at seeing through other people."

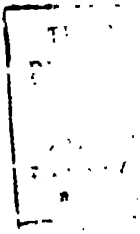
"Jack flatters."

"Do you see through me?"

"No—you dazzle."

There was a fling of the golden head. "That's not meant for flattery; that's plain evasion," retorted Evelyn.

"YOU WERE READING THOSE OLD EASTERN TALES?"



"How many disagreements we have in common!" said Poole, cheerfully.

She advanced a step or two into the room, a slender figure in white, standing half within the glow of the reading-lamp. The light fell sharply across her shoulders and upon her bare arms, catching a glint of gold from a ring she wore on her finger and now twisted reflectively. Her eye had fallen to the open volume on the table, and Poole noted the instant softening of her expression, the quick look of eagerness with which she turned to him, the badinage of the moment forgotten.

"You were reading those old Eastern tales?"

"And quite forgetting everything else," said Poole.

"Which ones have you been reading?" She was at his side, looking down eagerly, tenderly, upon the leather-bound volume. Her dress, her arm brushed him. Poole caught a faint perfume as the golden head bent close to his own. He was thrilled by this sudden sense of her nearness, her simple, eager absorption in the book. It all seemed strangely unreal to him, this moment alone together within the circle of lamplight while about them hung the dark silence of the old house and the mild stillness of the July night.

"Papa loved these curious old tales; he used to read them aloud to me when I was a little girl."

"You almost make me feel that I've been—intruding," said Poole. The volume which had absorbed him for the past hour seemed suddenly to have acquired a sacredness through her touch and words.

"Oh, you mustn't think that!" She looked up at

him in gentle protest; then, as if abruptly conscious of her closeness to him, she drew slowly back. "It's I who am intruding. And really, I meant to." Her tone regained its teasing accent. "I thought you had puzzled long enough over the burglary, and I came to tell you so."

"If I'm no longer to puzzle over it, you have something then to tell me?"

"Who—me?" A little startled, she drew back out of the circle of lamplight. "Oh no, I haven't," she went on, quickly. "I only meant that you had worried over it long enough for one day."

"I dare say I have, and, you see, I really had quite forgotten all about it, reading these old legends—right here on the scene of the crime." He indicated the safe in the corner.

Evelyn gave a little shiver. "You make me almost afraid of this room. I should think it would make you feel creepy, too."

"No. I rather like it," said Poole, "and there's always the chance that the mysterious thief might turn up here."

"Here! What do you mean?"

"Why, you know there's supposed to be some fascination about the scene of a crime that irresistibly draws the criminal back to it in spite of himself."

Evelyn edged toward the doorway, weighing his words to herself. Then she mustered her light, rebellious air:

"I'm going—but not because you frightened me away."

When she had gone Poole sat recalling the brief

vision of her presence. The room seemed strangely vacant now and still. He pictured again her gestures, the sweet, eager tones of her voice, the quick play and vanish of her expression. Then he reverted to the earlier scenes of the day, their walk together around the house and the drive to the village, then the tea on the lawn in the late afternoon. It seemed incredible that it had all occurred within the space of twenty-four hours. He found himself vaguely wondering about her relations with Archie, and the recollection of the young man in the hammock and Evelyn arranging the pillows came sharply back to him. He envied the lazy masculine assurance that she had chosen to wait upon. It had made a pretty picture; his memory rehearsed the brief colloquy of the scene.

Suddenly he started forward, his eyes narrowing to points of light. His brain went racing feverishly over each detail of that little scene, straining to recall each word and accent of the brief dialogue between the cousins when Archie had fussily complained about the pillows and Evelyn had readjusted them at the other end of the hammock.

"It's a clue! And I almost missed it!" he told himself, excitedly. Striding across the room, he wheeled about, as if to attempt something, then halted, frowning. The butler, with noiseless tread, appeared at the doorway.

"Beg pardon, sir," ventured Grimes, "will you be wanting anything else to-night?"

Poole looked at him vacantly. "Nothing, thank you."

The butler bowed and turned away.

"Oh, Grimes, one moment—"

The butler paused.

"I presume every one has retired?" queried Poole.

Grimes nodded. "Quite some time ago, sir."

"Would you mind quietly looking in at Mr. Archie's door? And will you particularly note how he is sleeping—I mean, on which side he is lying."

"Very well, sir." Grimes withdrew with a blankly puzzled face. His soft footfall was lost in the hallway. The house was supremely silent. Poole crossed and recrossed the room, impatiently awaiting the butler's return.

In a few moments there was a soft tread again in the hall, and Grimes reappeared at the doorway.

"Mr. Archie's sound asleep, sir."

"And he's lying—?"

"On his left side, sir."

Poole's lips tightened in satisfaction. "That's all, Grimes. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Alone, Poole again paced the length of the library with tingling pulses and his eye alight. "So," he soliloquized, halting before the iron safe in the corner, "the money and the ruby are gone; likewise young Mr. Spurling. Jack Winthrop is an undesirable citizen in the opinion of the senior Mr. Spurling; Miss Winthrop is fibbing; and Mr. Archie Winthrop cannot sleep on his right side."

He stretched his arms with a slow smile of satisfaction. "For a single day's work—and a rank amateur—that's not a bad start!"

CHAPTER IX

TWO weeks slipped by—a succession of serene mornings, with a soft breeze lifting the clouds above Prescott Ridge in great, tumbling, cottonlike balls into a sky of flawless blue; then followed the noonday pause of haze and heat when the breeze languished; then the long golden afternoons.

The Winthrops' motor-car, returning from Burwick, was speeding along the road that wound upward toward Prescott Ridge. The machine bowled swiftly along over the hard, dry macadam, tossing a thin streamer of dust into the air behind it. Evelyn was forcing the car to a brisk pace. At her side sat Montgomery Poole; the tonneau behind them was empty. At each turn of the ascending road the valley stretched in a broader panorama beneath. Along the roadside waifs of young cedar-trees, stragglers from the dark forest above, marked with their long and slanting shadows the waning afternoon. Suddenly the incline grew steeper, the pace of the motor slackened, and then began to lag. Another turn, and a gash of blue sky before them marked the depression of the Saddle-back in the crest of the Ridge. There was a short, grinding noise as Evelyn shifted gears, and turned to Poole with a mournful smile.

"I almost made it," she said, regretfully, and the

machine panted forward on the slow speed. Poole drew out his watch.

"Now don't tell me you are going to make another of your mysterious excursions into these woods," broke in Evelyn, noting his action.

Poole smiled. "Unfortunately, I must. But please don't breathe it to a soul."

"What? That I abandoned you again up on Prescott Ridge just as I've done every blessed day for the past week?"

"Precisely," agreed Poole. "As a matter of fact, though, you exaggerate. This is only my fourth venture into the woods."

"To-morrow will be the fifth."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Poole.

"And you always drop off at the very loneliest spot along the road," added Evelyn, "and leave me to invent some fib to explain your absence at home." The machine, gaining a level stretch, sped forward again through the ravine-like pass. "Is it a robber's cave you are hunting for?"

Poole debated the question with himself. "You promise not to tell?"

"Of course I promise. I'm always promising, though you never tell me anything."

"But I will tell you something now," continued Poole. "The day has passed when robbers' caves are to be found in the woods. They have gone quite out of fashion."

Evelyn's look of expectation faded to a disappointed pout. "Now you are only fooling again. You don't play fair, Mr. Poole. You have altogether too many secrets. Of course, I'm curious—

dreadfully curious. Who wouldn't be, in such a situation?"

"But your patience is admirable."

Evelyn gave a fling of her head. "Now you're trying to tease again. I'm dreadfully disappointed in you, Mr. Poole."

Poole sighed. "Unfortunately, detectives are frequently misunderstood. It's one of the penalties of the profession. In the last chapter, of course, everything is bound to be revealed in its true colors."

"But I don't want to wait for the 'last chapter.' I want to know now."

"Know what?"

"Why, what you know," said Evelyn, vaguely.

Poole spread out his hands, with a little laugh and shrug of his shoulders.

"A week ago you said you could trust me," went on Evelyn. "But you haven't confided a single thing. And you've made me tell you—lots of things."

The motor slowed down to a halt, and Poole leaped to the ground.

"If it isn't a robber's cave, what is it, Mr. Poole?"

Poole looked up at her keenly. "You insist on having the illusion spoiled for you? Well, then, I'm prowling about in these woods simply because I've a hunch that there's something to be learned from them—sometime."

"Something—sometime!" Evelyn ironically repeated.

"I know that sounds awfully vague—foolish, even. But I can't help feeling that the woods have a secret, and I'm bound to get it sooner or later."

"And then?"

He had taken off his hat, and now extended his hand to her. "Then I'll be as frank with you as you have been all along with me."

Her glance suddenly wavered—and her hand slipped from his grasp. She mustered a smile and a nod of farewell as the motor sped forward. Poole at the roadside watched her till the car disappeared behind a thicket of cedars. But Evelyn did not look back.

"As frank with you as you have been all along with me," she repeated, with vague misgivings. "I wonder what he really meant by that." During the remainder of the ride home her forehead wore a troubled frown.

Poole turned from the road into the woods, following a trail that had grown familiar to him. He walked leisurely along, his head lifted to the fresh, cool scent of the woods. His footsteps were lost upon a turf sown with pine-needles, which he swished at intervals with his walking-stick. Presently the gully and Spurling's cabin came into view, and Poole announced his approach with a familiar whistle. The occupant of the cabin did not look up from his work. He was squatting at the doorway, busily engaged in overhauling and mending some traps.

Poole drew near and watched the man's operations. "I've used my last match," he announced, at length.

Spurling jerked his head toward the interior of the hut while he went on with his work. "Help yourself—on the shelf by the door," he directed, laconically.

Poole entered the cabin. When he reappeared he brought with him a roughly made stool. Tilting back upon it, he lighted a cigar.

"Useless to offer you one, I suppose. Why don't you ever smoke cigars?" queried Poole.

Spurling shook his head, but he threw down the half-finished trap and after watching Poole a moment fumbled in the pocket of his worn corduroy trousers. "Not as long as there's a pipe to be had or a corn-cob to make one out of," he answered, but his tone was not ill-humored.

After a moment's silence Poole carelessly put a question:

"What's new in the woods?"

Spurling ignored the inquiry. He was puffing the tobacco in his pipe-bowl to a ruddy glow under the match he held to it.

"Bears ever bother you at night up here?" asked Poole.

Spurling spat reflectively. "The only thing on legs that bothers me up here is yourself."

"Umph!" retorted Poole complacently, and relapsed into silence. It was evident that during the past week he had established himself on some sort of comradeship with the old man, and that the latter, despite his grumbling at Poole's presence, had come rather to like these incursions upon his solitude.

"Ye've certainly done a sight of prospectin' around here. When be they goin' to start lumberin' in these woods?" asked Spurling, anxiously.

"I have pretty well looked the ground over," admitted Poole, "and I've about come round to your opinion."

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"Then you think the wood's not worth takin' out?" There was a hopeful note in the old man's words.

Poole deliberated over his answer. "I guess no syndicate will be tempted to tackle the job on any report I make about it. By the way, Spurling," he added, inconsequently, "are you a Republican or a Democrat?" Tilted back on the stool with eyes half shut, he surveyed the distant valley.

"Eh?" Spurling looked up mystified. "Mebbe I be a Republican."

"That's good," responded Poole. "You'll be voting in November then for Jack Winthrop. He's going to be put up for assessor."

"Young Winthrop—assessor?" echoed Spurling, surprised and frowning. "Then I don't vote the Republican ticket," he announced, flatly.

"What, you'd turn Democrat at your age?"

"Come next election day I'll stay home." Spurling sullenly picked up the trap he had been working upon. "Young Winthrop—assessor—humph!" he muttered to himself.

"Well, why not? What have you got against him?" demanded Poole, somewhat sharply.

"Nuthin'," snapped Spurling. He smoked in silence.

Poole shrugged his shoulders. Then he asked, quietly, "How long ago was it, Mr. Spurling, that Jack put a stop to your poaching on the Winthrop estate?"

"Huh! So he told you that, eh? Drove me off'n land my grandpop once owned. Said I spoiled huntin'—eh?—for him and his dude college friends he used to bring up here."

"Well, naturally," interposed Poole, "since it was his father's land—"

"His father's land!" Spurling got up from the doorstep with a harsh laugh. He walked over to the water-bucket and took a long draught from a dripping, rusted dipper. "His father's land!" he repeated, wiping his mouth and facing Poole again. "'Twa'n't no more his dad's land than 'twas yourn."

"What do you mean?" asked Poole.

Spurling looked down into the quiet gray eyes of the young man on the stool. "Damned if I don't tell you!" he ejaculated, in sudden resolve. He returned slowly to the doorstep.

"Queer—how some things get forgot," he began, at length. "I'll bet you there's not one person in Wilton to-day as knows what young Winthrop's name by rights is. And 'twa'n't meant for no secret at first. The Winthrops adopted him when they was livin' in Melverton more'n twenty years ago—him nothin' but a baby. His father's name was Havens."

"Havens?"

Spurling nodded. "And a bad un too. He wound up by landin' in state's prison, and died there. They was after him for more than one job, and they got him in the Melverton bank robbery—workin' too near home, you see. Up he goes—for fifteen years, leavin' a wife and three-months'-old baby to shift for themselves. She held out less 'n a year afore she got sick and died. That left the kid to the town of Melverton, and they was plannin' to put it in some asylum. Then the Winthrops, bein' kind-hearted people, stepped in. They took care of the

kid whiles it was being decided what was to be done. Nuthin' was done, and the Winthrops meanwhiles kep' the baby. They hadn't any children of their own then, and likely as not they got attached to the youngster. Anyways, by the time it was fixed what asylum the kid should be sent to, Mrs. Winthrop couldn't bear to see him took away just then, and so, without meanin' to at the start, they ended up by adoptin' him. Then Jim Havens died in prison. The Winthrops moved away from Melverton—so as the boy shouldn't grow up where he was known about, I reckon—and came to Wilton, where their little girl was born. And the two of them grew up together like any brother and sister. I dunno as they never told him who he really was. He's growed up like a Winthrop, and damned if he hain't took on all the airs of a Winthrop. . . . But he's got nuthin' but Havens blood in him, and Havens was a crook of the first water and died in state's prison."

"You can't blame the boy for that," said Poole.

"I'm blamin' nobody," retorted Spurling. "But young Winthrop don't come o' honest stock, and I got no use for him."

"And is all this quite forgotten in Wilton?" asked Poole, skeptically.

Spurling shook his head. "'Twa'n't ever allowed to get known in Wilton. There's those that might know of it. You see, it all happened in Melverton—not round here—and it's all of twenty and more odd years ago. I hain't heard anybody speak of it in years."

CHAPTER X

THE chug-chug of the motor-car fell upon Archie Winthrop's ear as he lay in the hammock on the veranda. He had been dallying with half a dozen magazines, but the stories had palled upon him, until one after another the periodicals had been flung upon the floor; and with a fresh cigarette alight he lay watching with bored disapproval the industry of the bees darting in and out of the clematis above him. Left to himself in the house, the afternoon had dragged tediously, until the sound of the returning motor-car caused him to look up hopefully. Through the screen of woodbine he could see Evelyn, alone in the car, rounding into the driveway toward the house.

"Where have you been?"

He put the question half petulantly as his cousin came up the veranda steps. Evelyn paused, contemplating the indolent youth in the hammock and the magazines scattered about.

"Where's Jack, and Uncle Geoff?" she asked, drawing off her gloves.

Archie made a vague gesture with his cigarette. "Give it up. Everybody has vanished. Why didn't you tell me you were going off in the car? It's been a perfectly stupid afternoon."

"I only ran over to Burwick—to do a bit of

shopping." Evelyn seated herself in one of the wicker chairs, removing her hat as she spoke and pressing her hair into place.

"You've been gone hours. Why didn't you offer to take me along?" demanded Archie.

"You didn't ask," said Evelyn. Dropping her hat and gloves upon the floor at her side, with a troubled, preoccupied air, she looked out across the valley, seemingly forgetful of Archie's presence.

"Hm!" soliloquized the young man. "So you preferred nobody's company to mine. That's a flattering reflection for a hot afternoon."

Evelyn did not reply. With her chin resting upon her hand she studied the distant hills.

"Nobody rather than me," Archie lazily repeated to himself. "I like that. Nobody rather than—"

Evelyn's eyes came momentarily back to him. "What are you saying?"

"I was saying that it is distinctly selfish of a young lady of twenty-one to run away and monopolize a sixty-horse-power motor all by herself."

"I didn't run away. And besides I had company. Mr. Poole went with me."

"Oh, ho! Now it begins to dawn upon my benighted intellect why I was left out," exclaimed Archie.

"You weren't left out. You could have gone too if you'd asked, as Mr. Poole did."

In the hammock Archie reflected a few moments. Presently he turned about and raised himself on his elbow. "It strikes me, Evie, you and Poole are getting just a bit thick, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Evelyn simply.

"You two seem to get in an awful lot of motoring together. By the way, what did you do with him?"

Evelyn gave a little shrug. "Left him—to hunt for the ruby." She was too weary or indifferent to invent a subterfuge.

"What—in Burwick? I say, Evie, how far is this nonsense—"

"Archie, I want to ask you something confidentially," broke in Evelyn, turning from her troubled survey of the distant hills.

"Confidentially?" There was a note of flattered curiosity in Archie's voice. "Well, fire away."

"Has Jack borrowed any money from you?"

"He has. What of it?"

"Two hundred dollars?"

"Correct. Don't tell me he isn't good for it. Being of distant kin, I'd naturally hate to sue the estate—"

"Did you know what he wanted it for?" Evelyn interrupted.

"Why, to pay back Poole. He said he'd had to touch Poole for funds on the voyage."

"Why should Jack need so much money—and so badly as to borrow—from a stranger?"

"Oh, come now, Evie. Jack's all right; but you've got to recognize that it takes some cash to keep a young man of his years and tastes under a full head of steam. And Jack won't run at half speed."

"I think he lost money gambling," persisted Evelyn.

"Only a little auction, he said, on the vessel coming over. That's not gambling. A little, more or less, out of pocket—this time more, because he came on

a slow boat. Only goes to show, Thistles, that the fast boats are the cheapest in the long run—"

"I do wish you would be serious, Archie."

"I am serious—over this matter, now, of you and Poole and the motor-car. I begin to suspect an invasion of my vested rights. Look here, Evie, when are you going to marry me?"

"Oh, please, Archie, don't begin that now," pleaded Evelyn.

In response Archie swung his feet from the hammock to the floor, and faced his cousin earnestly, although his tone was still jocular.

"Yes, I shall. I'm going on the war-path in earnest. You and Poole are getting as thick as thieves, presumably over this stolen-ruby nonsense, but that's too thin a pretext altogether. It's going too far, and I'm going to put a quietus on it for good. I know who was prowling through the hall that night the ruby was stolen—"

"Archie!" Evelyn's startled eyes were wide upon him.

"And I'm going to tell—blurt it right out regardless of—"

"You sha'n't!" Evelyn leaped to her feet and impetuously pressed her hands upon Archie's mouth.

Archie caught them in his own and drew them down. "Yes, I shall," he maintained.

"Please! Please, Archie!"

He threw his arm around her waist and drew her into the hammock beside him.

"You must promise that you will never, *never* tell Mr. Poole," insisted Evelyn, ignoring the close embrace in which he held her.

"Why not, Thistles?"

"Simply—because I ask it. Promise, Archie!"

"Promise that you will marry me," he countered. "That's a fair bargain." He was somewhat puzzled by her sudden display of earnestness, yet pleased with the turn things had taken, and ready to press his advantage to the utmost. "Otherwise, to-night it all comes out," he threatened.

"No, no, no! You mustn't breathe a word!" She was looking up at him imploringly as he held her close to him. He lifted her hand unresisting to his lips.

"Then we are engaged? If so, I'm as silent as the tomb about the ruby."

With her head on his shoulder, she hesitated, troubled and irresolute.

"Just a quiet understanding which we shall keep all to ourselves," he continued, coaxingly. "Yes?"

"You won't tell anybody—"

"Not a soul!" he assented, and his lips sought her cheek.

"Oh, Archie, I can't!" She feebly turned her head from his caress. "I don't love you enough."

"But you do love me."

"Perhaps—I don't know. Then her graver concern again became dominant. "But you won't tell about that night?"

"Not a word, now that we're engaged."

"But this isn't an engagement," she protested, weakly. "I don't know myself. I may change my mind."

He pressed his lips again to the hand he held with a tender reverence. "A woman may always do that. But you won't—"

"I'm not so sure." Evelyn straightened up from his embrace, her troubled eyes fixed vacantly upon her hat on the floor. "But you won't tell anything about that night. How did you ever happen to see—"

"You in the hallway?" He lolled back in the hammock with a laugh.

Her face went quickly blank with astonishment, unnoted by Archie, however, who went on: "I hadn't been sleeping well, and it was quite by chance that I got up just at that moment. My door was half open, and I caught sight of you tiptoeing down the hall toward the library. One glance was enough to tell me you were bent on some dark crime. I didn't dare venture out then. I was afraid I might startle you."

The words fell like strange sounds upon Evelyn's ears. She was dumbly staring at the floor, trying to readjust her thoughts to this sudden realization that her secret of that night was not shared by him after all.

"You made a very fetching thief—believe me—stealing along in your blue Japanese kimono and sandals."

"Did I?" She forced a quick smile to screen her astonishment and relief.

"And of course, the next morning, during the grand powwow that Poole instituted, I wasn't going to give you away," continued Archie.

"I remember!" She rewarded him with another smile. "You're a dear, Archie."

"But tell me about it. You didn't drill the safe—there was a real robbery too?"

She nodded, quickly gaining skill in this new rôle of deception. "There must have been. Isn't it strange?"

"Well, it makes all the worse tangle for Poole. Old chap, he'll have to do some tall skirmishing before he gets this affair puzzled out."

"I'm afraid he suspects me already," said Evelyn.

"Why should he?"

Evelyn gave a shake of her head. "I don't know; I just feel that he does."

"Only your guilty conscience, Thistles. However, I'll put him off your trail just for fun."

"Don't, Archie. I'm afraid—"

"Now don't you worry. I'll fix it. Just let me think it over for a while. I'll add a kink or two to the complications already existing that will exercise Poole's gray-matter."

"Then it's all a deep secret between you and me," she emphasized their pact. "You won't breathe a word?"

"Trust me for that, Evie." He rose and put his arm around her waist, drawing her toward him.

"Please, Archie, don't," she feebly protested, turning her face from him.

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "My rights," he said, gaily.

She picked up her hat and gloves and went into the house, leaving Archie whistling a merry tune and jubilantly kicking aside the magazines that lay scattered on the floor.

CHAPTER XI

EVELYN awoke to the radiance of a new day, the soft chirp of birds in the trees and the fresh smell of the dew-laden grass marking the unusual earliness of the hour. She had not slept well. She had gone to bed only to lie wide-eyed in the darkness, revolving in her mind the events of the day and the problems that beset her. Her thoughts had centered first anxiously upon her brother Jack, next upon Poole, his mysterious incursions into the woods, and his enigmatic words. Then Archie rose uppermost in her thoughts, and she frowned. Presently the vision of Poole again prevailed—she could see his gray eyes kindly but keenly regarding her from under a low-turned hat-brim. "He would be awfully good fun if it wasn't for this dreadful ruby," she lamented. "I like him. . . . If only this—this affair had not occurred to transform him into a soulless thinking-machine, when I know he could be so—so human, if it hadn't been for that. Oh, dear! If Archie goes and interferes he will only make matters worse. And I've made a mess for myself, too, letting Archie talk to me as he did. If only he hadn't given me such a scare! I thought he knew everything! . . . But I can't be engaged to him, and I must make that plain right away."

Again her mind reverted to her brother Jack, who

after all was not her brother. She knew what had been for years carefully withheld from him—the story of his coming into the Winthrop family. But she could not have loved a real brother more. He had been reckless, and worse, during his two years at college. The family had viewed with apprehension what they feared might be the outcropping of hereditary instincts in the lad. Impulsive, open-hearted as he was, he was nevertheless given to "moods." There seemed a daredevil spirit in him at times, a wilfulness and a rash irresponsibility which might lead into discreditable acts for the sake of some perverse end. While in college he had gravitated toward undesirable associates. The result had been almost tragic; but an enforced breaking with the past and two years abroad among new and different associations seemed to have sobered and steadied him.

Yet here, anew, was the debt incurred at cards and the loan from Poole. Evelyn realized how Jack would chafe under any delay in the instant returning of the money. It was like him to be heedless of his method in repaying such an obligation. She could not believe him guilty of outright theft; but the temptation of temporarily abstracting the ruby to trick Poole might readily have occurred to him, and meanwhile his easy-going mind might have condoned the temporary pawning of the jewel. But he no longer had the ruby; it was safe in her possession at the bank. What had been his feelings when he discovered that it was missing from his pocket? She was sorry now that she had not told him of it at once. Had she frankly done so, he might have

confessed to taking it—"in fun." But instead of telling him of her discovery she had ventured to test him a day or two before by asking if it was he who had abstracted the jewel from the safe, and he had denied it emphatically—too emphatically, Evelyn thought. Whereupon she had quailed at confronting him with the fact that she had shaken the ruby out of his coat in the bungalow. Beyond all this, and more dreadful, was that other knowledge of the night of the robbery, which loomed sinister and conclusive in her mind, and which for a moment she had feared that Archie shared. She shrank from contemplating it and fell to wondering how Jack could have explained the loss of the ruby. He could never dream that she had taken it out of his clothes. Probably he thought that he had lost it, and had been frightened by that fact into a deeper silence regarding its disappearance.

And all the while, what was Poole making of the whole affair? Vaguely, instinctively she feared him. She feared for Jack, and more for herself, lest she might unwittingly divulge the truth. Dissimulation was not easy to her, and this constant guard over what she knew made her at times timid when in Poole's company. She not only feared but liked him, for in spite of his rôle she was daily finding him more engaging and companionable; and as her liking for him increased, so did her fear, lest she let slip something that would lay bare her complicity.

If only Jack had owned to her in confidence that he had taken the jewel! But he had lied outright. If he had taken the ruby merely in fun, would he have done that? She sinkingly realized that it was

unlike him not to have trusted her with the truth so that she might share with him the knowledge while watching to see what Poole would make of it all.

Evelyn had fallen at last into a troubled sleep. Now she was broad awake, a glorious new day awaiting her, and again the dilemma of the ruby. A bath refreshed her, the cold water bringing a tingle and glow to her body, and reviving in a measure her buoyant spirits; but she had half finished dressing before the unusual obliqueness of the morning shadows arrested her brooding thoughts. She looked at her watch only to discover that it was not yet six o'clock. A little exclamation of dismay escaped her as she put the watch to her ear to make sure that it was running.

"Nobody will be up yet for hours," she reflected. But the blue sky, and fresh green of grass and trees, and the twitter of the birds invited her. "It's too beautiful a morning to miss. I'll go for a paddle on the lake."

A few minutes later she had left the silent, sleeping house and was tripping down the path toward the bungalow, a light paddle across her shoulder. The sun touched into tints of dull gold the soft masses of her hair. Her white flannel waist was open at the throat, and the sleeves turned back above the elbow. A short, close-fitting skirt left a glimpse of slender black-clad ankles above her little shoes. She passed the bungalow and, turning from the gravel walk, struck through the trees. Presently she came out at the edge of the lake where the boat-house stood. The water lay like a sheet of heavy glass, reflecting the pale tints of the early morning

sky and the dark green shadows of the woods that completely surrounded and sequestered it.

Evelyn emerged from the boat-house dragging a canoe. She steadied the little craft in the water, deftly climbed into it, and pushed out from the shore, the mirrored surface of the water breaking into gently receding ripples. In the intense stillness of the young day, the lake and the dark pines brooding along its edges achieved a somber, exquisite beauty. Silently Evelyn's paddle dipped into the heavy, sleeping water and came up dripping and flashing in the sunlight. The girl drank in the beauty of the scene, in which she and the light cedar shell were the only moving objects. A flush of color crept into her cheeks, her blood was soon leaping and aglow from the exercise, her whole youthful being responding to the joy and beauty of the hour. The shadows, doubts, and perplexities that had troubled her during the night seemed snatched away into a world of unreality.

After a time she paused, with lifted paddle, letting the canoe glide onward under its own momentum near the opposite shore. She put one hand over the side and allowed the water, here a deep, translucent green in the shadow of pines and hemlocks, to trickle fresh and cool through her fingers, musingly dipping them again and again into the soft, clear depths.

Just then a sound of crackling underbrush startled her from her reverie, and she looked up. Montgomery Poole was standing on the edge of the lake.

"You here! At this hour!" She gazed in frank astonishment at the young man on the water's edge.

"How about yourself?" he countered.

Evelyn's laugh echoed lightly. "I didn't know I was up so early, so I came out for a paddle. Don't you know it's hours before breakfast?"

"So much the better," said Poole. "I may yet succeed in finding my way around this twisted lake. Perhaps you will tell me which is the easiest way to get to the other side?"

"The easiest way?" With a sweep of the paddle she turned the canoe toward the bank. "Of course you mean the obvious way, which is to get into the canoe." The bow came shoreward, and Poole caught and stayed it. He clambered lightly aboard.

"And now, perhaps, you will inform a curious maiden what in the world you are doing out here at this hour."

"Canoeing," said Poole, comfortably settling himself in the bow.

Evelyn made a little face at him.

"Mayn't I take the paddle?" asked Poole.

"No, because I may want to splash you with it," said Evelyn, "and I certainly shall if you are going to be as exasperatingly evasive as you were yesterday."

"I fear it's a habit I've been falling into lately," reflected Poole, staring at the water.

"You'd be much nicer without it." The canoe glided onward. "I wish this miserable affair of the ruby had never happened." Evelyn dug the paddle viciously into the water.

"So do I," agreed Poole. "I can at least plead that I didn't start it. Look here!" he continued, when she ventured no reply. "Why shouldn't we play that it never has happened—just for this hour?"

He leaned forward with a new frankness in his manner.

"It would be nice," assented Evelyn.

"Then there is no ruby and never was. Just for the hour there are only you and me and this glorious morning in which it's a joy just to be alive."

"Do you love it too—all this?" Evelyn with the paddle indicated the encircling woods and water. "I should never have thought you cared—with your absorption in plots and clues—"

"There! You are spoiling it already," protested Poole.

"Forgive me; I forgot. But you see I don't know you this way."

"Just imagine that I'm a perfectly strange young man dropped suddenly from the clouds into this canoe—"

"But strange young men don't drop from the clouds," objected Evelyn.

"Why not? From a passing aeroplane, you know. It's a feasible situation."

"No, it's too utterly romantic. If you had taken such a tumble you would have smashed the canoe most gloriously, and we should both be floundering in the water."

"Then I would spring to the rescue and save you from a grave in these watery depths."

"But I can swim perfectly."

"But not in the story," persisted Poole.

"No. I suppose in the story I should finally be spluttering my dripping and undying thanks to you on the shore, and then—"

"And then—what?"

"Why, I should end by marrying you, of course," Evelyn blushed, but came out bravely with the conclusion. "But you are not a 'perfectly strange young man,' and so the story is all wrong from the start."

"That's the discouraging part of it," sighed Poole. "If only you didn't know me already—"

"Know you, indeed! Does one ever get to know an oracle or a sphinx?"

"Surely I'm not as bad as that," protested Poole.

"I think you are a little of both."

"But for the hour I am neither. I'm just an intruder, if you like, tremendously aware that he is sharing a canoe with the most charming girl in the world."

A tinge of color crept into the girl's cheeks, and her head bent over the paddle. The simple frankness of his words made them difficult to parry.

Poole interpreted as a rebuke the silence that ensued. "You surely don't mind my saying that, do you?"

"If you won't say it again."

"Then I'll only think it."

"But you mustn't even think it."

"Sitting face to face with you here, I can't help thinking it."

"Then I'll put you ashore," decided Evelyn.

"And what becomes of our little hour together that we just now planned?"

"Spoiled—and all your fault."

"Then I must change the subject. May I venture to remark that some French or Indian guide on the Canadian lakes taught you how to handle a canoe?"

"How did you guess?"

"From your stroke—it's not the mincing dip-dip one usually sees on our American ponds."

Evelyn laughed. They were gliding past a marshy inlet hedged with reeds, and Poole caught sight of a cup of white and gold opening to the morning sun.

"Hard-a-port," he commanded. He threw off his coat and bared his arm well above the elbow. As the canoe swung round and lost headway he plunged his hand deep into the water and brought up the lily with its long, slippery, dripping stem.

"There's another—just ahead." He secured it and tossed it, after the other, at Evelyn's feet.

"And not another one in sight." Poole surveyed the flat expanse of dark green pads.

"Are they for me?" asked Evelyn.

"Well, they hardly make a bouquet," said Poole regretfully, "only two buds with about forty feet of stem per."

"Never mind." Evelyn took them up, detaching each stem close to the bud, and tucked them into her hair, one behind each ear.

She made a pretty picture in the end of the canoe, the white and gold of the fresh, damp lilies shining against the masses of her hair, the line of her throat and the turn of her chin at a bewitching angle, as she demurely posed her head for an instant and regarded him aslant.

"*Bien!* Do I look Japanese?"

"You look like the nymph that undoubtedly presides over this lake when no mortals are around," said the young man, surveying the effect she had wrought.

"I know her," said Evelyn.

"So do I," Poole agreed, promptly. "And if there hadn't been an embargo put upon a certain class of personal remarks five minutes ago I'd tell you what I know about her."

Evelyn paddled in silence, and the embargo held.

"I wasn't even to think things, but I am—right now." Poole shamelessly declared his rebellion. "In all my experience—"

"Experience?" Evelyn seized blithely upon the word. "You mean *tête-à-têtes* in canoes? Do tell me about some of them, Mr. Poole."

"I didn't mean that. You know I didn't."

"But you surely don't deny having had them? Listen, I've learned a little, your trick of drawing deductions from the most commonplace act. You manage to adapt yourself so readily and with such ease to the bow of this canoe while I'm paddling that I know it's the result of long practice. A girl like me is naturally a little curious. You can't imagine how backward we are up in this corner of the world; you are the first man I ever paddled with in a canoe in my life."

Poole endured her banter in silence. Her words had stirred his recollections of more than one past summer—moonlight nights, lantern-hung shores, music on the water—what an incredible jumble they made! He suddenly realized how immeasurably this canoe and this girl differed from all the others. One or two sentimental passages into which the music and moonlight had beguiled him now rose rather sickeningly before his vision. How far removed from all that medley was this present hour, the cloistral

silence of the woods, the unmarred beauty of the lake awakening to the young day, and the straight, slender girl in the stern—aloof from all the world and untouched by it. "You're the first man I ever paddled with in my life," had been her simple avowal. His heart surged at the thought. He felt a new tenderness growing within him.

" . . . I don't believe you've heard a word I've said," she ended, finding Poole still meekly silent under her bantering.

Poole looked up at her. "Oh yes, I have. But when people who don't live in glass houses take to throwing stones, what recourse is there? I can only be thankful if you don't smash all my glass."

"Mr. Poole!" She had crimsoned under his words, and instantly wished her jaunty sallies unsaid. She was tenderly quick with her regrets.

"It was silly of me to talk that way. I was only trying to tease you in—in self-defense."

"Self-defense?"

"Yes; you were thinking nonsensical things, and getting belligerent because you couldn't say them—"

"About the nymph that presides over this lake?"

Evelyn nodded.

"And why shouldn't I say—some of them?"

"Because you don't know the nymph well enough to discuss her—you don't really know her at all."

"Beyond mortal ken—is that it?"

"No she isn't!" said Evelyn, emphatically. "But you wanted to put her there—with what you said."

"On the contrary," interrupted Poole, earnestly, "I wanted—hoped rather—to lure her back to earth—"

"That's putting her elsewhere, to begin with. She never was anywhere but on earth. In fact, she isn't a nymph at all," Evelyn concluded, abruptly.

"Do you know, I am very glad that she is not?" said Poole, quietly, meeting the blue eyes turned upon him.

CHAPTER XII

"THERE'S Uncle Geoff waiting for us," said Evelyn.

Poole turned in the canoe to see the portly figure of Colonel Winthrop standing under the trees near the boat-house, watching their approach.

"Then we are back in the world of mortals," he said, regretfully, turning again to Evelyn.

"Where you cease to be one," she answered.

"Don't put it that way," said Poole, appealingly. "Please try to think of me as human, no matter what happens—"

"Ahoy, there!" Colonel Winthrop hailed them. "What in the world have you two been up to at this outlandish hour of the morning?"

Evelyn and Poole exchanged glances. "You tell him," said Poole.

"What is there to tell?" asked Evelyn.

"Everything—and nothing," the young man answered. He leaned forward, a little wistful entreaty in his words. "I'm sorry our little hour is already spent, but I shall not forget it. Mayn't I say that we have both in a way been wearing disguises which for this moment we were beginning to put aside?"

Her eyes leveled at him and then fell. He could not divine the throb of her pulse and the shy, glad

tumult which his words had awakened in her. He went on earnestly.

"If affairs do take a wry turn, we shall not forget this hour, shall we? I want to hold it in my memory, treasure it, a thing apart—"

"Say, you two conspirators out there in the boat!" Colonel Winthrop's high-pitched voice genially assailed them.

Poole turned and waved to him. "Good morning, and how are all the pirates on shore? If you were an early bird you might share in these excursions."

"Early bird? Good Lord! You are nothing less than night-blooming cereuses. Here I am up and out hours ahead of time, and yet hours behind you two. What's got into everybody this morning?"

The canoe glided slowly to the bank. Poole sprang ashore and reached out his hand to assist Evelyn. As she rose and came toward him the canoe wabbled and lurched. Losing her balance, she suddenly found herself in his arms, her short cry of dismay muffled against his coat. The next instant her feet were securely upon the ground.

"How strong you are!" gasped Evelyn, surprised to find herself so light a burden in his arms. The young man made a dash to catch the canoe recoiling from the bank.

"I don't see any fish," put in Colonel Winthrop, as Evelyn turned to greet him.

"The fish aren't up yet either, Uncle. I went out alone for a paddle, and found Mr. Poole marooned on the other side of the lake, where I had to rescue him and bring him home."

"That explains *your* escapade. What Poole was

up to on the other side of the lake is of course a dark secret beyond conjecture." Colonel Winthrop suspiciously eyed the young man turning the canoe upon the grass to dry.

"I think I'm entitled to protest against having all my acts made mysteries of. I was only up early and out for a jaunt when Miss Winthrop spied me. Can't I follow my simple vagabond instincts without having it construed as sleuthing?"

"It's the penalty you pay for your recently adopted profession," observed the Colonel. "Then you weren't on the trail of the robber?"

"Singular or plural, Colonel?"

"What's that?"

"Masculine or feminine?" Poole went on dryly. Evelyn's grasp tightened on her uncle's arm.

"We're asking you," parried Colonel Winthrop.

"Perhaps I may have an answer for you soon," said Poole, shortly.

They set out toward the house, Colonel Winthrop lagging behind with Evelyn until they had fallen a few steps in the rear. Then, in a low tone that could reach only her ear, he said: "I want to talk to you after breakfast. Don't let the others know. I've some astounding news."

"Astounding news! Uncle Geoff! What?"

"'Sh! Not with Poole around," he cautioned. They caught up with Poole and returned together to the house.

In spite of her morning excursion on the lake Evelyn had little appetite for breakfast. Disturbed by her uncle's words, she toyed with her food, and fell into long lapses of silence in the midst of the

gay chatter at the table around her. Archie had precipitated a wordy warfare by twitting Jack about his new political aspirations.

"Assessor—bah! Why don't you go in for sheriff, or some office that has got a little excitement and real work attached to it?"

"Real work always did arouse your admiration, I've noticed," retorted Jack. "You've always carefully managed to avoid it. Run for sheriff yourself."

"Thanks, but I'm not a legal resident of this charming county," replied Archie. "A sheriff, though, in the family would be a distinction and something to be proud of. Besides, you would come in handy when Poole begins making arrests—eh, Poole?"

"Not a bad idea, that," said Poole, without looking up from his foray into a dish of blackberries floating in yellow cream. "Jack and I might get in some team work."

"Then there are to be arrests?" asked Colonel Winthrop, his eyes cocked sharply at Poole over the tops of his glasses.

"Arrests?" Poole looked around the circle and smiled. "They never come until the last chapter," he answered, evasively.

"And what chapter have we got to now?" demanded Jack. "Loosen up, Poole, and give us a glimpse into the dark workings of your inner soul."

"My inner soul, as you call it, is not on exhibition —except between the hours of five and six A.M.," Poole added, with an afterthought. He did not look at the golden head opposite him.

"Then I'll never see 'em, that's certain," put in

Jack. "But what chapter *have* we arrived at? Don't we ever get a report?"

Poole studied his spoon for a moment. "Speaking dramatically, I should say we had reached the third act."

"Third act, climax; fourth act, catastrophe. I remember that from Old Towser's lit. class at college. Is that what you mean, Poole?"

"Something like that."

"Then it's about time something really happened."

"I think something may," said Poole, quietly. His eyes intercepted Evelyn's, fixed wide and solemn upon him.

The arrival of the morning mail a few moments later led Poole to excuse himself and retire to the library with some letters that had come for him.

"I think he's only bluffing," said Jack, when Poole had left the room. "I believe he's as much stumped over the burglary as we are." He glanced around the table with a grin, but his smile died slowly out as he beheld in turn the faces of the others silently intent upon their plates.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Are you all guilty?"

When Colonel Winthrop had finished his breakfast he rose from the table with a little meaning glance toward Evelyn, who quickly followed him into the hall.

"What is it, Uncle? I'm dying to know. I could hardly sit out breakfast—"

"Come out on the lawn, Evie, under the oak by

the old sun-dial. We won't be disturbed there; Poole's engaged in the library with a lot of mail. By the way, have you noticed that his correspondence is a trifle voluminous for a man without any business attachments left behind him?"

"I know something more than that," said Evelyn. "He's got a lock-box at the post-office for mail which does not come addressed to him here."

"Is that so?" Well, come along; we must improve this moment while he's busy with his letters and Jack and Archie are out of the way playing tennis."

He led the way out to the lawn on the north side of the house and crossed to a secluded spot among the trees where an old sun-dial, set upon a stone pedestal, stood weathering through the years. The oaks and maples had grown up around it until it was almost wholly cheated of the sunlight.

"I'm a little disturbed over this detective enterprise of Poole's," began Colonel Winthrop, frowning and biting a cigar preparatory to lighting it. "Let's sit down here, Evie, where we're screened from the house. Of course Jack put him up to it—it isn't as if Poole had taken this thing up himself—but I don't quite like the turn it has taken."

"How do you mean, Uncle? What turn has it taken?" asked Evelyn.

Colonel Winthrop threw one knee over the other and straightened his waistcoat. "Why, this. Somehow or other Poole has discovered the facts about Jack's parentage."

"Uncle Geoff! Really?"

Colonel Winthrop nodded and frowned. "At

first I didn't see how that could have anything to do with the case—"

"How did you learn this?" interjected Evelyn.

"Poole told Archie last night. Dropped it casually, just as if it were an indifferent matter he'd chanced upon quite by accident."

"What did Archie say?"

"Oh, nothing. What was there to say? Archie is as sensitive about this family secret as any of us. Poole didn't seek to discuss the subject. Just showed that he knew it, and let it drop there. I begin to think now that it was a deliberate move on Poole's part."

"Then you think it's Jack that Mr. Poole suspects?" Evelyn's heart was sick with apprehension.

"Suspects Jack of what?"

"Of stealing—I mean, of taking the ruby."

"You mean taking it in fun—for a joke?"

"Ye-es," assented Evelyn, weakly.

"I don't know. Why should he—any more than any of us?" Colonel Winthrop inspected the end of his cigar. "This may be all imagination on my part, but I tell you, Evie, I don't like it—Poole's stumbling upon Jack's past or unearthing it in some fashion. Somehow it makes me uneasy. Why, I don't know. I thought I'd tell you about it, ask you if you knew any reason why Poole should be centering on Jack. Do you?"

Evelyn shook her head uncertainly. Her fingers toyed uneasily with a bit of loose bark from the rustic bench on which they sat.

"It has a bad look to me," went on Colonel Winthrop, frowning at the sun-dial where, as the sun

mounted higher and peered through the trees, a long shadow began to move slowly among the hours. "If Poole had stumbled upon Jack's antecedents quite by accident and thought nothing of it, he would have had the decency to refrain from mentioning the fact. That he has deliberately come out with it, to my mind argues some definite purpose. And it rather knocks out any question of this being merely a bit of opera bouffe that we are involved in."

"How do you mean, Uncle?"

"I mean that Poole has shown that he no longer thinks that he is dealing with a piece of mere trickery —a playful conspiracy against him. Don't you see how rank it would be for him to bring up the secret about Jack, even without any insinuation, if he thinks Jack or the rest of us are only in fun with him? Poole has as good as declared that to him this is no longer a joking matter."

"But if he suspects Jack and suspects Jack seriously," interposed Evelyn, with a look of dismay, "why, that would be—"

"Theft, precisely." Colonel Winthrop finished the sentence with an emphatic nod.

"But how ridiculous!" said Evelyn, weakly.

He looked at her sharply, as if divining some misgiving latent in her tone. "Look here, Evie, you don't refute that with much spirit."

Evelyn shrank a little from him. "I can't believe Jack would really steal," she declared, flatly.

He continued to study her face over the edge of his eye-glasses after her glance had wavered from his to the sun-dial.

"Evie, you say you don't believe that Jack would

steal the ruby, but have you any reason to think he might have been the person who broke into the safe?"

The girl hesitated.

"Come! Your face tells me there is something you're holding back. Can't you share it with me in confidence?"

Evelyn still gazed dolefully at the ancient marker of the hours. Then, with sudden decision, she faced him. "I *will* tell you, Uncle. I *know* Jack took the ruby and the money from the safe."

"You *know?*"

"I *saw* him."

"Great Scott!" Colonel Winthrop put his cigar to his mouth, but it had gone out; he flung it from him. "You *saw* him? Then all the time you've known—that! Come, my dear, tell me frankly what you do know. If Jack is in a predicament—"

"How can he be? Why should he really want to steal?" broke out Evelyn, despairingly. There was a sobbing catch in her voice. "I've been so worried, Uncle Geoff—"

"There! There!" He put his arm comfortingly around her. "Tell me all about it."

From the shelter of Colonel Winthrop's shoulder Evelyn recounted her tale. "I didn't sleep well that night. What with you and Jack home again, and the beautiful jewels you had given me, and with the excitement and all, I lay awake until long after midnight. I had a curious presentiment of the burglary. I lay thinking, what if the house should be robbed and the jewels taken. I was really worried about them. Finally I did drowse off. After a

while I awoke. I had been having some confused, dreadful dream. My alarm about the jewels was all astir again. Then I heard a noise—some one moving about; it came from the direction of the library. I got up and went to the door and looked down the hall. There was no light, but I was sure some one was in the library. I was too scared to do anything but creep back to bed. A few minutes later I heard the soft footsteps again, this time coming nearer. I was dreadfully frightened. I huddled down under the bedclothes, not daring to breathe, while the burglar tiptoed into my room and across to the window. Then I saw that it was Jack! The window was open; he lifted the screen without making the slightest noise, and climbed out.

"It gave me an awful scare, though of course when I saw that it was Jack I wasn't so frightened. But I was still worried about the jewels, for fear a real burglar might come after all. I thought they would be much safer under my pillow, so I got up and slipped into a kimono and sandals, and tiptoed down to the library. But when I got there—my courage seemed to give out all of a sudden. The house seemed so big and dark and silent. I could make out the safe in the corner and the table and chairs sort of looming out of the awful blackness. My knees just gave in, and I ran back to my room. In bed I lay listening for more sounds—but there weren't any—and wondering why Jack had stolen into the library and out through my window, and then I must have fallen to sleep."

Colonel Winthrop whistled thoughtfully to himself, a very sober look upon his face.

"The next morning then—when it all came out—you knew of course—"

"I knew it was Jack, but I thought he had only done it in fun. Don't you remember how you had suggested doing something of that kind the night before when we were talking about crime and detectives?"

Colonel Winthrop nodded.

"I thought then that Jack had gone ahead and done it just to puzzle Mr. Poole."

"Maybe that was it, after all," said Colonel Winthrop, suddenly.

Evelyn shook her head. "I've tried to think so, and yet something won't let me. The thought that Jack might have broken into the safe—well, deliberately—keeps tormenting me. You see—" Evelyn hesitated.

"See what, Evie?"

"I might as well tell you," sighed Evelyn. "Jack had asked me for money that first evening. He had had to borrow two hundred dollars from Mr. Poole."

"The devil he did!" exclaimed the Colonel, frowning. "Borrowed it from Poole on the voyage? I'll wager that continual game of auction in the smoke-room was a much steeper affair than he let on to me, the young scapegrace! How else could he have been short of money? I was paying all the bills and keeping him rather liberally supplied with cash. So he wanted money to pay back Poole, eh?"

"I would have given it to him if I had had it. But there was only that little bit in the safe. Then I explained how I would have to draw on Mr. Haldane for the money. And I couldn't charge it to

household expenses. At that he frowned and said 'Oh, bother!' and told me to let it go."

Colonel Winthrop rose and walked toward the sun-dial in a minute inspection of the grass at his feet.

"Do you think Jack would really steal, Uncle Geoff?" demanded Evelyn appealingly of his retreating back.

He threw out his hands with an impotent gesture. "Don't ask me!" His forehead had wrinkled into lines. "It does seem to explain why only the ruby was taken. He could raise money enough on that to reimburse Poole. A real burglar would never have left the diamonds, that's certain."

"But I found out yesterday that Jack borrowed the money from Archie," said Evelyn, carefully withholding her knowledge of the ruby's latest adventure.

"Then perhaps he had difficulty in pawning the stone, or was afraid that Poole might get track of it or—" Colonel Winthrop came abruptly to an end of his alternative.

"Mightn't he have lost it?" ventured Evelyn.

"Oh, that's altogether unlikely."

Evelyn was silent. Her heart rebelled at divulging what she still held secret from every one—the discovery of the ruby in Jack's clothes. That, somehow, she must keep to herself.

"It's a mighty bad case against Jack," said Colonel Winthrop. He came back to the seat beside Evelyn. "Thank the Lord, Poole doesn't know this."

"How much *does* he know?" demanded Evelyn, impatiently. "Sometimes I feel sure he suspects

me of having taken it or of knowing about it. It's dreadful to be always guarding this knowledge from him. I'm so afraid I'll let something slip—"

"Sit tight, Evie, sit tight," counseled her uncle, sagely.

"If only I could really think that he suspected nobody but me. But now that Mr. Poole has learned about Jack's—being adopted, and has deliberately spoken of it—"

"It looks bad—bad! We've got to put Poole off the track somehow. Meanwhile, I've got to have a talk with Jack."

"Uncle Geoff, you can't tell him what I've said!"

"No—I can't do that, but I can put him through some kind of a third degree," said Colonel Winthrop, uncertainly. "I can ask him if he took the ruby—in fun, of course—and see what he has to say."

"It's no use, Uncle Geoff. I asked him myself several days ago. He denied it positively."

A mild oath escaped *sotto voce* from Colonel Winthrop. "Is it possible the Havens blood in that youngster is coming to the surface after all? I thought that mess at college had sufficiently sobered him."

Evelyn's face was in her hands.

"There's one or two points, though, that I don't quite understand," pursued Colonel Winthrop, after a silence. "If Jack forced the library window to get in, why should he risk discovery by venturing into your room to go out?"

"I don't know, unless because it was an easier way to get back to the bungalow. If he had gone out by the library window he would have had

to skirt the entire rear of the house again—the servants' rooms, you know, where some one might be watching. But tell me, Uncle, could Jack have drilled the safe?"

"Why not? It was a simple enough operation. That old box wouldn't withstand the assaults of a tack-hammer."

"But Mr. Poole said it had all the appearance of a burglar's work."

"Professional, you mean. Perhaps Jack was shrewd enough to think of disarming suspicion in that way—doing the job in true burglar style."

"But how could he have done it?"

"Any old drill and an oil-can would do the trick. There's a lot of tools in the shop in the bungalow. I saw them myself the next morning."

"If Mr. Poole saw them!"

Colonel Winthrop shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid he did. He made the most hawk-eyed kind of investigation that morning. There were some drills in the shop: one or two of them, I noticed, did show signs of very recent use—oily, you know."

"Why didn't you hide them?"

"What was the use? Poole had already been through the shop and the chemical laboratory down there before I took a look round. Still, some of the servants may have had occasion to use the drills. There's really nothing conclusive about that."

"Oh, dear, what shall we do? Can't we stop it all somehow?"

"I don't see how—unless Jack orders it. If Jack asked Poole to drop it, why, of course Poole couldn't very well go on."

"But if Jack really meant to take the ruby he wouldn't have been so eager to have Mr. Poole fathom it out," said Evelyn, glimpsing a new ray of hope in this seeming paradox. "He wouldn't have employed Mr. Poole to try to find the thief if the thief were himself."

"Unfortunately, that argument is not nearly so good as it sounds. There's a reckless kind of sporting instinct in Jack. He's quite capable of daring a rash deed like this, and then daring its detection—giving the other side a fair show, so to speak, and enjoying the sensation of having set the hounds on his own trail. That would be just like him, confound it! On the other hand, Jack may be more crafty than we think. He may have judged that Poole would prove the most harmless kind of amateur investigator—much preferable to the sheriff or police who otherwise might have taken the matter in hand. He couldn't very well stand idly by and allow your ruby to be stolen—the house deliberately robbed—without doing something about it. Such conduct on his part would have had a curious look, to say the least."

Evelyn sprang to her feet. "It's no use, Uncle. The more we talk, the worse it seems—for Jack."

"Well, I'm going to have a heart-to-heart, uncle-to-nephew talk with the young gentleman at once, and see if I can't get to the bottom of the matter. I'm convinced that it's a serious situation, and Poole's last move has as good as told us that he thinks so too. Naturally, if Poole's got anything on Jack he's in an embarrassing position himself. In that case his announcement to Archie last night is a tacit

hint to us to force Jack to give up, and so permit Poole to escape awkward conclusions in pressing the issue."

"Then it's perfectly splendid of Mr. Poole!" cried Evelyn, warmly. "If Jack has really done wrong—to leave a way out for him." A sudden wave of gratitude swept over her. Since the canoe-ride of the morning Poole's place in her thoughts had vastly altered.

"There he is now," said the Colonel, looking toward the house. Poole had come out on the veranda, followed by Kenji Kato bearing the *go-ban*. "He's evidently not on the war-path this morning."

"It's the first time he has played that funny Japanese game since the ruby was stolen," observed Evelyn.

"All the more proof that he's marking time and waiting for us to make the next move," fretted Colonel Winthrop. He watched Poole and Kenji Kato ensconce themselves with the *go-ban* in a shady corner of the porch. "Do you know, for a while I half suspected that little heathen of his had a hand in this mess. These Japs—you can't trust 'em. Well, I'm off to have it out with Jack."

"But you won't breathe a word about our talk together," said Evelyn, taking her uncle's arm as they slowly returned across the lawn toward the house.

"Not a word."

As they mounted the veranda steps the soft rattle and sharp fillip of the *go* stones greeted them. Colonel Winthrop and Evelyn paused a moment on the porch to watch the two silent heads bent over the *go-ban*.

"So you've taken to *go* again," observed Colonel Winthrop.

Poole slowly nodded without looking up. He was already deeply engrossed in fighting out a critical position in *ko*.

CHAPTER XIII

"HE wouldn't even look at me! He must have known that I was standing there with Uncle Geoff. And this morning on the lake he was—so different."

Evelyn had gone to her room, and shutting the door, stood musing over the recent encounter—or rather, non-encounter—with Poole on the veranda. She had run lightly, even eagerly, up the steps in advance of her uncle; but Poole, engrossed in his game, had lifted no smile to her, had not even deigned a glance from the straggling lines and masses of black and white counters that seemed to hold him bewitched. She was hurt—more than she would acknowledge—by this trivial ignoring of her presence. And yet, that very morning in the canoe—her pulses quickened at the recollection of that hour on the lake. She could hear his words still echoing in her ears. She could see him sitting opposite her, his hat and coat flung aside, a boyish smile on his face when he spoke, a gentle, caressing earnestness in his tones to which she had vibrated in response more than she dared confess even to herself. The lilies which he had picked for her lay on the table. She took them up one after the other, drinking in their strange perfume, and then impulsively she pressed them to her lips. The moist, acrid odor of

the petals lifted about her. She stood holding them crushed to her cheek, a dreaming, down-cast look in her eyes, a soft commotion stirring in her heart. For her the world was somehow changed; and yet the day was still young—this day on which she had risen a care-free girl, and now felt herself transformed—a woman. He had lightly given, and she as lightly taken, the two lily-buds caught up from the depths of the lake. But his gift had not gone unrequited, and she realized now that the exchange weighed heavily in his favor. With the quick, sharp hurt of his momentary disregard of her had come a strange enlightenment.

She flung herself upon the bed, still clutching the flowers to her breast, and gave herself up to a sweet, yet troubled reverie. He must never know—she breathed the confidence to the flowers. Here was still another secret to be guarded from this alert, all-perceiving young man, whom she feared and now liked all too strangely well.

"He can't—he won't betray Jack," she tried to assure herself. "He must know how I love Jack. Even if Jack did take the ruby, he wouldn't do that. If he cares for me," she timidly let herself frame the thought, "he won't betray Jack. If I could make him care more he would want to please me." She thrilled at the thought of what such power given into her hands would mean. . . .

A sharp, familiar whistle impatiently repeated outside the window broke upon her musings. She sprang up hastily, glancing in the mirror as if to detect upon her flushed face the telltale marks of her recent thoughts. Then she went to the window.

"Oh, there you are." Archie, on the lawn, looked up at her. "I've been hunting all over for you. I'm off to Burwick in the car—come along?"

Evelyn shook her head. "I can't, Archie—not this morning."

"Oh, come along," teased her cousin. "It's a ripping morning for a ride."

Evelyn remained obdurate. "I've a thousand and one things to do. I really can't."

"That's a whopping fib," said Archie. "Look here, Thistles"—he drew nearer the window—"come along, and I'll let you pick out the most dazzling solitaire old Lambrick's got in his shop—"

"Archie! Hush! If some one should hear you! I can't do that—"

"Yes, you can. You don't need to wear it—not right away, if you don't want to."

"But, Archie, I never will wear it. I'm *not* engaged to you."

"Well, of all fickle women—"

"I'm not fickle," protested Evelyn.

"Yesterday we were engaged," expostulated Archie.

"Were we?"

"*Were* we? Well, I like that!"

"Now, Archie, please! It's perfectly ridiculous to be leaning out of a window talking in this fashion. Whatever I said yesterday—"

"You take back to-day." Archie glumly completed the sentence for her.

"But, Archie, you know we were only fooling, and, besides, you said it was always a woman's privilege to change her mind."

"If you'll only keep on changing it—once more, at least. Come along to Burwick. We'll talk it over."

"No, Archie, please. I can't go to Burwick," said Evelyn, with finality.

"Well, then we'll talk it over later," declared Archie. "Just the same, I'm going to have a look at old Lambrick's diamonds." With this ominous remark he started reluctantly away, and then looked back at her. She was still at the window, her chin in her hands and her eyes following him.

"You might at least throw me a kiss," he shot back at her.

Evelyn's pensive expression vanished on the instant. With elbows prettily atilt, she put the finger-tips of both hands to her lips and sped the salutation toward him with a merry laugh.

"Thanks for what I can get," murmured Archie.

Poole, coming around the corner of the house, had been an involuntary witness to Evelyn's gay dismissal of her cousin.

Colonel Winthrop, in wait for a favorable opportunity, had promptly followed Jack to the bungalow, where the latter had gone to change his clothes after his game of tennis. But on the porch the Colonel tarried for a while, hesitant, debating his best course. From somewhere within the bungalow came the swishing sound of a shower-bath, and presently a strident, masculine voice chortling in song. Colonel Winthrop, summoning his resolution, at last went inside.

"May I come in for a moment?" he called through the closed door of Jack's bedroom.

The song ceased, and a hearty voice answered: "That you, Uncle? Kick the door down."

Colonel Winthrop entered less violently.

"I'm not exactly costumed for a formal reception," said Jack, standing in the center of the room in his underclothes, and fitting cuff-links into a shirt. "Chuck anything you like on the floor and sit down," he continued, motioning toward the cluttered chairs. "I took three straight sets from Archie this morning." He broke again into his strident song.

"That voice of yours!" protested Colonel Winthrop, shaking his head.

"What's the matter with my voice?" blithely demanded the youth, while he went on with his dressing. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear it? I should say I can hear it."

"Well; then, why the withering remark? You're looking glum as a grave-digger anyhow. What's up?"

Colonel Winthrop meditated the sturdy figure of the youth before him."

"I want to have a word or two with you confidentially."

"Confide away, then."

The Colonel studied the broad shoulders and back of the young man, who now stood facing the mirror of the chiffonier brushing his stiff blond hair.

"It's about this disappearance of the ruby," he began.

"Eh?" Jack paused, a brush in each hand, and caught his uncle's eye in the mirror before him. "You mean the great robbery?"

"Come, now, own up. It wasn't a robbery."

"What was it, then—a trick to try out Poole?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

Jack banged the brushes together and set them down. Leaning against the chiffonier at his back, he turned and confronted his uncle.

"Why me?" he demanded, bluntly.

"Because I think you perpetrated—the trick."

"In that case you get another think."

"No, honestly now, I want to know. If it's your game, I won't give it away. I'll join you in it."

Jack was silent.

"It's a bit rough on Evelyn, you'll admit. She doesn't know whether her ruby is really gone or only temporarily abstracted."

The young man frowned. "I told Evie I'd replace the ruby myself, if it didn't turn up," he said, with evident annoyance.

"That's not the point. She wants to know—"

"Does she think I took it, too?" cut in Jack.

"Why, naturally that idea has at times occurred to her."

"And *you* think so?" the youth interrupted again.

"Well, yes," admitted Colonel Winthrop. "You remember how we were talking about framing up something for Poole's benefit—"

Jack bridled. "I tell you positively that I didn't take it. I know absolutely nothing about it."

Colonel Winthrop created a diplomatic pause by helping himself to a cigarette from a box lying on the table. Jack waited in silence while the Colonel secured a match and struck it. "You see," the latter temporized, "Poole is threatening to make mountains out of mole-hills—"

"I see one thing," cut in Jack, bluntly, "and that

is that you don't believe what I just said." His brow was gathering in angry, sullen lines. "Why don't you come out and say so, Uncle Geoff?"

"To be perfectly frank with you, Jack—"

"You had better be," came the first sharp flash above the muttering of the approaching storm.

Colonel Winthrop flushed. "Well, then, if you will have it! That you stealthily entered the house during the night the safe was robbed, I have good reason to believe—"

"How good are your reasons?" snapped Jack.

"Sufficiently good to warrant my assertion," replied Colonel Winthrop, tartly. "You stole into the library that night—late, after every one else had retired, and you yourself had gone to the bungalow. You crawled in through a window and went out the same way."

Jack's face showed uneasy surprise. His lips started to frame a rejoinder, and then shut in a bitter line. A hard, new glitter flamed in his eyes.

"Well, what have you to say?" fretted Colonel Winthrop, while Jack paced the length of the room and returned to the chiffonier.

"Who saw me?" he demanded, hotly.

"I don't see that that matters."

"Was it Evelyn?"

Colonel Winthrop shifted his legs uncomfortably beneath his chair.

"Then it was Evelyn," Jack went on, resentfully. "And she told you." With a smothered imprecation he turned away and sat down on the bed, his head between his hands.

In the silence that followed a little clock on the

table ticked loudly. Colonel Winthrop nervously pulled at his mustache, speechlessly regarding the bowed figure of his nephew. He had regained control of himself after the brief flare of temper. He realized that he had said the very things he had resolved not to say and had put them in a way that was most unfortunate.

"Now look here, Jack," he began, mildly, "there's no sense in our rowing this way. Nobody's accusing you—"

Jack abruptly lifted a pale, drawn face, but immediately dropped it again to his hands.

"I know it was all meant in fun. The trouble, confound it, is that Poole isn't taking it that way."

"Then he knows?" said Jack, without looking up.

"No, he doesn't know," put in Colonel Winthrop, quickly. "At least, Evie hasn't breathed a word. If he has found out anything, he has learned it by himself."

"Then what makes you think he knows?"

"Why, I can't say exactly. You see—"

Footsteps sounding on the bungalow porch and then in the outer room caused Colonel Winthrop to stop short.

"That's Evie's step," said Jack. "By Jove, I'm going to call her in!" He sprang to the door and opened it.

"Oh, are you there, Jack?" came his sister's voice from without.

"Come in here," said Jack, harshly, with a jerk of his head.

"Why, what is the matter?" Evelyn entered the

door, and then, catching sight of her uncle, gave a little cry.

"We're having it out. You might as well hear it, too, since you are one of my—my accusers," Jack ended, bitterly.

"Jack!" exclaimed Evelyn, instantly wounded by his words.

"I tell you, nobody's accusing you," repeated Colonel Winthrop, testily.

Jack turned with a hard, cynical laugh. There was an evil flame in his eyes as he faced them. "Why beat about the bush this way? You know in the bottom of your hearts you do accuse me. You accuse me of deliberately robbing the safe—of stealing Evelyn's ruby."

"Jack!"

"Of course you don't like to put it into so many words, but that is it—you think I'm a thief!"

A dull red color flamed in the boy's cheeks, and his eye blazed angrily. To his sister he seemed suddenly transformed into a strange creature of hate and passion. She shrank back, clutching at her uncle's arm.

The young man eyed them fixedly. "And let me tell you," he went on, slowly, his voice now hard and metallic, "I know perfectly well why you think me a thief. Because my father was one."

The faces of his listeners blanched at the words. They flinched, as if he had suddenly struck them with a heavy weapon.

"I admit you have the best of grounds for your suspicions," he flung bitterly at them.

Colonel Winthrop, struggling to regain his voice,

managed to exclaim weakly, "Then you know—this —this—"

"This close-guarded secret of the Winthrop family?" He forced a laugh, but the sound ended chokingly. The tide of long pent-up feelings, breaking all barriers, now seemed to sweep over him, quenching his quick anger. "Mother told me—I mean, Evelyn's mother." The words ended brokenly almost in a sob.

"Jack!" Evelyn sprang toward him, bursting into tears as she clung to him.

"It was years ago," he went on, dully, when his voice had steadied; the words sounded huskily above the soft note of Evelyn's weeping. He had put his arms around the girl, supporting her, while his eyes were focused hard upon some point in space. "It was years ago. I had frightened her by some prank of mine—worse than usual, I suppose. She made me kneel down beside her, and prayed. She made me pray, too. Then she told me—everything."

Deep silence reigned in the little room. A tear trickling down upon the boy's cheek caused him to lower his face to the soft cloud of Evelyn's hair as he held her close to him.

When he looked up he had mastered his emotion, and his resentment slowly gathered heat again. Evelyn felt his muscles tighten as he drew away from her and defiantly faced Colonel Winthrop.

"You may say that the lesson was wasted upon me. There are things in my past that look pretty ugly. Well, I am what I am, and I don't pretend to be anybody else. There's been a robbery in the house, and it points to me. Perhaps I'm guilty.

There may be reasons why it would be very difficult to prove that I'm not guilty. At first I denied taking the ruby. Now that you have accused me, I withdraw that denial. I neither deny nor confess. You may think what you like. It is all being searched out by a man who will get the truth of it if any one can. You may take your suspicions to him if you wish. I shall do nothing."

He snatched up his coat from a chair, jerked it on, and started toward the door.

"Jack!" interposed Colonel Winthrop. The boy turned, his hand on the knob, and looked sullenly at his uncle.

"You mean, then, that you will do nothing, say nothing?"

"I mean exactly that. Poole is handling this affair. Let him go to the limit if he wants to."

Colonel Winthrop leaped to his feet. "That's the very thing I'm afraid he's going to do!"

"Then let him. It won't be *your* funeral if he does." The door shut behind the speaker with a heavy jar. Jack's steps sounded across the porch of the bungalow and died out.

"And now what?" Colonel Winthrop despairingly confronted Evelyn's tearful face.

"You shouldn't have told him," sobbed Evelyn. "It's only made everything worse than it was before."

"I didn't mean to, Evelyn. I'm awfully sorry. But we both lost our tempers, and somehow it slipped out."

"He'll never forgive me—accusing him in this way when he knew—"

"But who would have dreamed that he knew? Your father was unceasingly watchful, year after year, to keep from him the least knowledge of his birth."

Evelyn wearily pushed a lock of her hair into place. "Just the same, I believe mother did right in telling him. It must have impressed and restrained him as nothing else could have done. "Mother knew best, and she wouldn't have told him if it hadn't been for his good."

Colonel Winthrop gave vent to a half-whistle, half-sigh. "Well, the fat is in the fire, so far as I can see."

"If it could be I and not Jack that Mr. Poole really suspects," said Evelyn, with a feeble muster of hopefulness.

Her words set Colonel Winthrop to thinking. "Poole has got to be side-tracked somehow," he stated, emphatically. And as they left the bungalow together his brain was already busy with a scheme.

CHAPTER XIV

FOR the remainder of the morning Evelyn found her attention forcibly diverted from graver concerns by household matters which Mrs. Scoville brought to her. Then Mr. Haldane, the executor of the estate, drove out from the village with some business papers which required both her attention and Jack's, and his stay was naturally prolonged by an invitation to luncheon, which he accepted. The presence of a stranger at the table relieved the tension which otherwise might have made the meal that day something of an ordeal. Evelyn, smiling vaguely at Mr. Haldane's grave, spectacled eyes, but scarcely hearing a word of his slow, deliberate discourse on village affairs, was none the less grateful for the lucky chance that had brought the aged solicitor at this juncture. Jack ate his food in stolid silence, leaving to Archie and his uncle the task of replying to Mr. Haldane's ponderous speeches.

Luncheon over, Colonel Winthrop speedily vanished; Archie, having an errand in the village, drove back to Wilton with Mr. Haldane, leaving Evelyn to an idle half-hour's chat with Mrs. Scoville before the latter retired for her afternoon nap. Poole and Jack had gone outdoors with their cigars. Later Evelyn, looking out from her window, saw them on the tennis-court, and, obeying a restless impulse, she

carried outdoors the bit of embroidery she was vainly trying to work upon, and found a seat for herself under the shade of the elms beside the tennis-court. Her needle plied industriously at moments while her troubled thoughts reviewed the scene which Jack had precipitated in the bungalow, and then her hands fell idle as she looked up to note the progress of the game and covertly to watch Jack. In the zest of the contest he seemed to have wholly regained his buoyant spirits. Presently Evelyn's work lay wholly forgotten in her lap.

It was nip and tuck between the two men—Jack playing with a dash and vehemence that frequently scored a brilliant point; Poole, less aggressive, but more adroit, drawing his opponent here and there by cool, careful placing until some final desperate reach should fail and the ball go wild or into the net.

In the excitement of the match Evelyn found her sympathies curiously divided, veering abruptly from one to the other of the players. After the revelation of the morning her heart went out longingly to Jack. She loved him—wild, generous, capricious boy that he was—with a tenderness that could not have been deeper, had he been truly her brother. It was the deeply rooted affection of years, augmented by a sisterly and even motherly concern which she had come to feel for the reckless, care-free youth. She adored his sturdy, masculine strength, his lithe, supple movements and splendid dash as he brilliantly forced his attack. But opposing him was Poole. In a more timid, self-distrusting way she secretly thrilled in response to his cool, masterful play. He seemed continually to hold some resource in reserve,

while expending only the necessary minimum upon the task of the moment before him. He met Jack's furious assaults with slow, graceful skill and finesse, displaying only in occasional critical moments a burst of speed or a quickness of eye and wrist that was the more impressive by this contrast. At such moments Evelyn found herself breathless at the impending disaster, and then tingling with glad surprise as Poole averted it. Her heart paused, fearful for him, and then beat joyously in his triumph.

Once, when Poole, taken on the defensive, had made a desperate half-volley and had caught by the narrowest margin the swift return, lobbing it high over Jack's head and causing him to beat a headlong retreat from the net, Evelyn clapped her hands in delight.

As Jack walked to the backstop to recover the ball he called out to Poole:

"The gallery is rooting for you."

Evelyn flushed. A moment later, when the final point of the set went to Poole in much the same way, she jumped to her feet in elation. The action was not lost upon Jack, who picked up the ball and in fun viciously smashed it at Evelyn. She dodged it with a little shriek and laugh, and when Poole started after it across the lawn she imperiously stopped him. "Don't you get it, Mr. Poole. Make Jack get it," she commanded.

Poole passed her with a smile, but did not stop. Evelyn with a little stamp of her foot called after him, "Mr. Poole!" He turned uncertainly. "You are not to get that ball," she said, flatly.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Poole.

"But I do," insisted Evelyn. "Come and sit here, please."

She saw him waver, and then abruptly turn and join her on the grass. Jack from across the net watched the proceeding in astonishment. He retired whistling to the distant backstop, where he dropped to the ground and sat stubbornly awaiting further developments. "She certainly has got him trained," he meditated.

The *impasse* thus arrived at was interrupted by the approach of Grimes across the lawn, followed by a blue-coated messenger-boy bearing a telegram addressed to Poole. With a word of apology, the latter tore open the yellow envelope, and then frowned at the message. It was headed, "Windsor, New Hampshire," and read:

Absolutely no traces here. What next? Wire Park Hotel. JACOBSON.

"I hope it isn't bad news," said Evelyn, noting the look of vexation that had come upon Poole's face.

"Nothing to mourn over," he replied, easily. "But it will require an answer. Taking from the messenger-boy the stub of a pencil which he carried, Poole scribbled a reply:

"H. H. JACOBSON,
Park Hotel, Windsor, New Hampshire.
Try Windsor, Vermont. Letter follows to-night. M. P.

Meanwhile Jack, finding himself utterly ignored, got up and came over to the group under the trees.

"Do you mind, Jack, if we call it off for the after-

noon?" said Poole. "I'm afraid this telegram necessitates a letter or two that I've got to get off by the evening mail."

Jack flung down his racket by way of acquiescence and stretched himself out on the grass. "Just as you like, old man. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Poole shook his head, smiling to find Evelyn's blue eyes wide open and questioningly fixed upon him, nodded to her mysteriously, and walked off toward the house, his head lowered in perplexed thought.

In his room he flung down the crumpled telegram with a muttered imprecation, awoke Kenji Kato to alert action with a sharp word of command, and changed his clothes mechanically while his mind moodily wrestled with some problem. Later, in the library, after his letter was written and sealed, he took down two of the manuscript volumes which had been his frequent study during the past fortnight. Slowly he turned the pages, pausing here and there, and finally settling with a frown upon a page where the narrative broke off abruptly to give place to a diary-like series of entries.

Mr. Winthrop's collection of legends from the East were assembled in a curious fashion. They had been written down from time to time on one side of the page only. In one or two of the volumes the blank pages on the left had been haphazardly covered with a miscellaneous array of other matter. There were bits of local history, happenings in the village, notations of various small affairs set down in abbreviated form. At times these odd jottings were without order or sequence, elsewhere they fell into a skeleton-like diary. Poole, turning over these pages of miscel-

laneous memoranda, paused at a passage which ran thus:

March 20.—G. here for week's visit.
April 2.—Send *Comptes Rendus* to binder.
8.—Write A. At Windsor.
25.—Paper for Burwick Philosophical Society.
May 3.—Major Grantham dead.
5.—Hydrogen experiments.
15.—Lease Fenton property to Daniels.
June 3.—Astounding letter from A.
4.—Changed plans. J. and E. off to White Mts.
7.—Details from Windsor. Bad business.
12.—A. leaving Windsor. Wants to come here. Consent.
15.—Letter from E.
23.—A. here, not well.
29.—E. to visit at G's.

Poole scanned the entries, as he had done scores of times already. His lips were set in a line of dogged resolve.

"It's there," he said to himself. "I'll stake my last dollar it's there—cryptic, tangled, the merest shred—confound it! But it's there! The truth has simply got to come out of that. If it can't be Windsor, Massachusetts, or Windsor, New Hampshire, it must be Vermont. If it isn't . . ." Poole closed the book with a sharp movement and began to pace the floor, revolving again in his mind the finely spun theory to which he had labored for two weeks to give substance. He knew that it was a bold venture, a rash presumption from the slenderest of evidence. He hardly dared put it into words for fear that its absurdity might be too manifest. And yet he clung to it instinctively, tenaciously, groping

meanwhile for some clue, some material fact that would supply the necessary links where his chain of reasoning gaped hopelessly open.

"Jacobson must strike the trail at his next try. If he doesn't, then I've been merely guessing and wasting time. Jacobson surely hasn't let anything escape him. Trust him to use a fine-tooth comb! However, I suppose I should have made a try at those towns myself, if it wasn't for—" his eyes fell to the picture of Evelyn in a little oval frame upon the library table. As he pondered the question he found for himself various excuses for delegating certain important investigations to a subordinate. "And in an affair like this, there's something in being right here on the spot," he reflected; but his thoughts chose to linger not so much upon the case in hand as upon a canoe-ride which he had taken that morning on the lake.

In the evening after dinner Poole found his way out to the veranda, where in the still, cool softness of the air and the waning light he sat for a while alone, smoking and watching the first star trimming its silver lamp in the darkening eastern sky. From within presently came a series of rippling notes from the piano, marshaling abruptly into sonorous impromptu chords, then the music swept into the impassioned measures of Schumann's C-major Fantasy. Poole's thoughts reverted from his agent, who by this time in response to the telegram was speeding onward to new fields. The perplexed frown on his forehead cleared. He leaned back in his chair, drinking in the flood of melody that floated out through the open

windows, while his eyes watched the yellow lights twinkling in the village and new silvery points softly stealing forth in the purpling sky. A gush of mellow light from the window fell athwart the floor, cutting the deep gloom of the veranda. Above his head the woodbine and clematis, now deserted by the bees, hung dark and fragrant.

Poole sat listening to the music, and his thoughts hovered tenderly over the golden-haired girl at the piano within. The flood of song seemed to lift him up and carry him away into a world of dreams. The vision of her in the canoe came back to him. He lingered over each word and smile and act. . . .

At length a cautious step sounded on the veranda. Without turning, Poole recognized and instinctively resented the approach of Colonel Winthrop. The latter drew a chair toward Poole and seated himself. For a time they smoked in silence, listening to Evelyn's music. Then Colonel Winthrop touched Poole on the elbow.

"I've a little surprise for you," he ventured, in a low tone.

"Yes?" queried Poole, looking aslant at the Colonel.

"It's this." Colonel Winthrop deposited a small object in Poole's hand. The latter slowly scrutinized it in the gloom.

"What! The ruby?"

"Precisely."

"You don't mean to say you found it?" asked Poole, quietly, turning the stone about in his palm.

"Well, not exactly." Colonel Winthrop laughed uneasily. "That is—I found it where I put it."

Poole deliberated a moment. "So, this is a confession," he said, at length, and squaring round upon his visitor, closely regarded him.

"From a guilty conscience," admitted Colonel Winthrop. "I thought the game had gone far enough."

"But I hadn't called quits," protested Poole.

"I know that, Poole. You must forgive me for spoiling the fun rather abruptly. But to be perfectly candid, you've scared me out by taking it so plagued seriously."

Poole shrugged his shoulders. "You'll admit you gave your little joke a rather serious setting, Colonel."

"I know, I know," hastily agreed the other. "I rather overdid the matter in the way of local color, so to speak. It has worried me, in fact. That's why I thought best to make a clean breast of it."

"Perhaps it's just as well. I admit I've been pretty thoroughly stumped. How was I to know that safe-breaking was among your many accomplishments?"

Colonel Winthrop made a deprecatory gesture with his hand. "An army engineer, you know, can usually be depended upon to possess a variety of odd accomplishments."

"I venture to say you used a drill or two from that workshop in the bungalow?"

"Ah! You discovered that? I thought afterward that I hadn't covered up my tracks very well. Putting the tools back was rather characteristic of an amateur, eh? But by forcing the window from the outside—"

"That was a shrewd stroke on your part," put in Poole, "on which I must compliment you. It certainly gave a burglarish look to the whole business."

"Altogether too much so," agreed Colonel Winthrop. "That's what has been troubling me. You see, I couldn't let you go on, let every one else think, too, that it was a real robbery—" His voice dropped to a whisper as Archie came out on the veranda. Poole's fingers discreetly closed over the ruby.

"Mum for the present," said Colonel Winthrop, guardedly pressing Poole's arm as he rose and rather noisily shifting his chair.

Poole nodded comprehendingly, and Colonel Winthrop retreated abruptly indoors.

"Where's he off to?" demanded Archie.

Poole shrugged his shoulders. With a cautious movement he secreted the ruby in his left waistcoat pocket. The music from the piano had shifted to one of Brahms's melodious Intermezzos.

Archie looked uncertainly about him, yawned, and finally dropped down on the top step of the porch, his back to one of the big white pillars. Presently he addressed the man in the chair at his right.

"How goes the great mystery?"

Poole again lifted his shoulders. "It does not go so swimmingly that any advice or suggestions would not be appreciated."

Archie laughed. "I suggest, then," he began, idly, "that you make particular study of a tall dark young man."

"With dark eyes, a cheerful disposition, and no quarrel with the world to speak of?" queried Poole.

The man on the step nodded. "Your additional details fit fairly well."

"And you recommend that I watch him. For what reason?"

"For the best of reasons—no reason at all."

"Your description," went on Poole, after a moment's study of the distant lights of the village—"your description, with my additions, is still a trifle lacking, since it does not preclude yourself from answering to it in every detail."

"That had already occurred to me," agreed Archie, lightly.

"And 'for no reason at all' seems in that case the best of warrant for suspicion," the other incisively put in.

In the gloom Archie's smile escaped observation.

"May I say for myself," Poole continued, "that the dark young man in question has not gone wholly unsuspected?"

"That is interesting, since it shows that our suspicions, though independently arrived at, have in a measure agreed," retorted Archie, amiably.

"The difficulty in adding two and two together and making four," went on Poole, "is that one and three will give precisely the same result."

"I don't follow you there."

"I mean that when the result is known, the only question is what factors went to the making of it. Always aside, of course, from the question why the result should have been desired at the outset."

"I'm afraid you are too deep for me," confessed Archie, lazily getting to his feet again. "But as an interested spectator in this little affair which engages

your efforts I again commend my suspicions to you."

"Of the dark young man?"

"With the cheerful disposition, I believe you added, and—what was it?—no quarrel with the world to speak of?"

"That is it, precisely."

"Very good," said Archie. "I wish you every success, and as a souvenir of our little conference together may I give you this?" He placed a small, dark object in Poole's hand.

Poole regarded it unmoved. "The light is not good here, but if I'm not mistaken, your little souvenir is a precious stone—a ruby."

"And rubies are what you are seeking, are they not?" asked Archie. "I think this one should interest you very much indeed."

"It does," said Poole, and Archie without more ado sauntered back into the house.

Poole studied the ruby in his hand a few moments before transferring it carefully to his pocket. As his left waistcoat pocket was already the receptacle of a similar stone, he deposited this one in the pocket on the right.

"Do I really look as easy as all that?" he asked himself; and, tilting back in his chair, he regarded the stars with amused disgust.

CHAPTER XV

ARCHIE'S return into the house was marked by a sudden silence from the piano. Poole, smoking in the shadows of the veranda, caught some light exchange of words between the cousins, a murmur of conversation punctuated with notes of laughter and playful protest. Archie was teasing Evelyn again, or beguiling her with some drollery. Poole found himself envying their easy, confident intimacy. When the piano again broke into a dash of arpeggios and resounding chords Poole leaned forward, his elbows upon his knees, his chin disconsolately in his hands. After all, the thought came home to him, he was but an intruder for a passing week or two in this little family circle. Presently he would be gone, and it would be a different scene, perhaps the Yardleys' at Lenox, where as an unattached young man his presence for a week-end was assured of a welcome. There would be rounds of golf in the afternoon, in the evening rubbers at auction, drinks and gossip with the male contingent of the party, over which he would smoke too much; then departure elsewhere as the social chances of the season might determine. As he contemplated the future this futile round of existence seemed unutterably dismal. He saw himself as little better than a wayfarer, possessed of certain social accomplishments which

insured a welcome here and there, but in reality as homeless as any wandering minstrel going from hall to hall in Viking days.

As the piano began an accompaniment, and Evelyn's soft soprano joining with Archie's barytone stole out in a melody of song, the loneliness, the detachment of his position was sharply borne in upon him. He grudged the passing of each brief moment in this simple Berkshire home, where he lingered as in a strange, delightful oasis before he should set forth again upon the sandy social wastes. With bowed head he sat listening to the song that floated out into the still night air:

"Dich hab' ich geschlossen ein
Tief in meines Herzenschrein;
Verloren ist das Schlüssellein,
Nun must du ewig d'rinnen sein."

Presently the song ceased, and from the piano came the slow final chords. While in his ears still echoed the rich wavering soprano Poole pictured to himself the room within, a golden head bent over the black and ivory of the keyboard, and bending, near, the handsome face of a slender, dark young man.

With an effort he flung the vision from him, tossed his expiring cigar into the darkness, and lighted another. Puffing it to a glow, he bent his thoughts sharply upon the brief colloquies with Colonel Winthrop and Archie of a few moments before. Half provoked, yet amused, he recalled the carefully devised admissions of the one which had been interrupted only that he might hear the other's mocking insinuations directed toward himself. With a sup-

pressed exclamation that might have betokened either amusement or disgust, he strode down the steps and out upon the lawn.

Looking back toward the house, a dark hulk against the brilliant starlit sky, Poole saw Evelyn presently appear silhouetted in the radiance of the doorway. She came out on the porch, a shadowy figure in white, hesitated, then, catching sight of the glowing point of Poole's cigar under the shadow of the elms, she tripped down the steps and came toward him across the lawn. He watched her draw near, noting the soft rustle of her gown, the faintly gleaming flesh of her neck and arms, the subdued brilliance of her hair under the starlight. She announced her discovery of his retreat with a low, musical laugh.

"Why did you come down here?" she asked. "Didn't you like the singing, Mr. Poole?"

"Then you knew I was listening?"

"I knew you were being unsociable somewhere out on the porch. And you came down here to be more so? Because, if you did, I am sorry to intrude. But I want very much to tell you something." Evelyn's fingers toyed with the bark on the rustic arm of the bench. "I have determined—to be frank with you."

"You mean you have not been?" asked the man, quickly.

"Perhaps—not altogether." He could see a faint, rueful smile playing about her lips. In spite of the spur to his curiosity and the quick remarshaling of his theories which her words commanded, he found the man in himself longing to dwell upon her face, dimly beautiful in the night, to listen, in blissful

disregard of the import of her words, to the musical cadences of her voice.

She had seated herself beside him, her shoulder almost touching his arm which rested upon the back of the bench, her profile for the moment sharp against the black obscurity of the trees; and then both her eyes turned full upon him, starlight in their depths. "I am going to tell you everything," she said.

"Ah!—then all this time—you've been keeping something back?" he queried, reproachfully. It was the disappointment of the investigator; the man himself was content to sit thrilled by the sense of her nearness to him.

"Only because it was part of the game," she said, looking away from him. "Now I'm tired of playing the game."

"So am I," he said, earnestly. "I don't feel human in this rôle. I don't mind playing a game elsewhere, but here—with you—I want to be myself, unhampered and unrestrained"—with a gesture of his hands he strove to complete his meaning—"if you will let me."

As he spoke he leaned slightly toward her. Without daring to look at him, and with a quickening tumult in her breast, she felt what his words and attitude held unexpressed. But she held herself resolutely to her task—the step she had resolved upon that afternoon only after repeated falterings, and which now frightened her; in the whirl of the sudden emotion which his words had evoked she now took it, before she was aware. Somehow, blindly, drawn to him by these strange new bonds of more than comradeship, she felt that all must come right. Of

course, it meant that she must fib to him—but a very harmless fib, the sole means of rescuing Jack. Later, perhaps, might come tears and repentance. In such mad foolishness she ventured to set foot upon the first of the half-truths that like a series of slippery stones were to enable her to cross the torrent.

"The game, then—it's played out?"

She turned impetuously, eagerly toward him. "Before I confess, tell me—did you at any time suspect me of taking the ruby?"

She caught the sudden blank look in his eyes.

"Please don't try to look surprised. You know perfectly well I'm guilty. I've been dreading all along that you would accuse me outright, and that I should reveal everything."

"Then this is a confession?" he asked, slowly.

She looked a little anxiously at him, and then quickly away. "Of course, stupid!"

"That you broke open the safe—"

"Oh, goodness, no! I didn't do that!"

"Then I don't understand," said Poole.

"Why," she went on, "I took only the ruby!"

"I am very dull," said Poole. "I still do not understand."

Evelyn shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Now listen! It's as simple as A-B-C." She gaily lifted a finger at him as if at a child, while she ventured a further hazardous step across the stream. "Some one broke into the house and drilled open the safe," she propounded the first step in his lesson. "That's been plain as day from the start."

Poole nodded. Whatever his reservations as to the obviousness of proposition number one, he kept

them to himself as he sat leaning slightly forward, his hands loosely clasped between his knees and his eye vacantly upon the tips of Evelyn's slippers, that fretted the hem of her dress.

"Well, it was really I who first discovered the theft—long before Mrs. Scoville did. You may imagine I was mightily relieved to find that the burglar had overlooked the little box tucked into that top cubbyhole. Only the money was gone, and that was a mere trifle. It was then that I thought of you." She turned blithely upon him, but he continued to study the ground at her feet.

"It seemed such a simple, stupid affair—a burglar carrying off only twenty dollars. I wanted to complicate it, make it a real mystery for you to unravel, as uncle and Archie had suggested."

"Why does he look at my feet and not at my face?" she asked herself uneasily, in the pause which she offered for his comment.

"At first I thought of taking all the stones," she went on, when he did not answer, "but that seemed too dreadful, even in fun. Then it occurred to me to take only the ruby. That, I knew, would puzzle you."

"It has," said Poole, looking up at her; and he smiled faintly. She welcomed it with inward relief, like a mariner greeting a clearing sky.

"And now that I've brought my confession to you, are you going to be good and forgive me for playing such a mean little trick?" The last of the treacherous, slippery stones had been reached; she was almost again on solid ground.

She was adorably humble in her appeal—to the

man; the investigator, outraged by the fiction she was foisting upon him, deliberated over her petition.

"Must I beg for forgiveness," she persisted, "when I've confessed so dutifully?"

"My dear girl"—it was the investigator who spoke, and with a sudden wicked delight in his eyes—"I forgive you with all my heart. But, unfortunately, my forgiveness has got to be shared around somewhat. If you won't mind that?"

"Shared around? What do you mean?"

"I mean that there are others equally to be forgiven, for yours is only the third confession of taking the ruby that I have had the pleasure of listening to this evening."

"The third!" Evelyn's look of blank astonishment was merged in the sudden flare of deep crimson that mounted to her face. She half started up from the bench.

"Mr. Poole! You are joking!"

"On the contrary, I am being made a joke of," said the investigator, gloomily. "But that you should have joined forces with the others"—with a little gesture of despair he reproached her—"that I would not have believed."

"But I haven't! Oh, how can you think that of me?" She turned upon him rebukingly. "What have the others been telling you?"

He forced himself to avoid her eyes, that were both piteous and beautiful. Instead, the investigator found a mocking retort: "You surely wouldn't ask me to reveal—confessions," he said, ironically.

She made a quick, impatient gesture. "I know

absolutely nothing about the others. Won't you believe me?"

What did it matter what he believed? He wanted to take her in his arms—doubts, fabrications, mystifications and all—to sweep away the foolish coils in which they were entangled, and tell her plainly that he loved her, and that for all he cared the ruby—the real ruby, wherever it was—could go hang. But she had deliberately sought to deceive him; this his brain struggled to hold coldly clear.

"I want to believe you," he said, slowly.

"But you don't!" She drew slightly away from him. And now the temerity of her undertaking began to grow clear and to alarm her. Discordant factors which she had not reckoned with she had now to face. What had the others been telling him? Surely Jack had said nothing, and he alone could have divulged the truth. It must be her uncle and Archie that had been meddling. But it was too late to retract. At any cost she must struggle to maintain the dubious position to which she now stood committed. And one powerful resource still lay at her command—the ruby itself. It must, it surely would, give color to the foolish fiction that she had essayed. How could he doubt her words when, as proof of them, she should put the ruby itself into his hands?

"It is unkind of you to judge me this way," she began, warmly.

"I am not judging you," protested the man.

"You are. You've condemned me already in your heart."

"If you only knew my heart!" he said, dryly.

"You haven't any. You've just a cold, unfeeling intelligence. This morning in the canoe I did begin to think differently about you. I wanted to feel differently. I wanted to trust you. That's why I came to you to-night, ready to give up my little secret; and you—you doubt what I say and then ridicule it. That ends it all."

Poole was silent. When she spoke again it was with a new and frosty dignity. "You haven't even asked for corroboration of what I have told you. I insist now that you receive it."

"I shall be most happy—" he began.

"I hope you will be a little sorry," she retorted, "when I show you to-morrow the ruby itself."

"The ruby!" exclaimed Poole, in astonishment.

She faced him coldly. "Your accent alone betrays how utterly skeptical you are and have been. Of course, I mean the ruby."

"Then you have the ruby? Where?"

"Where it has been all the time—at the bank in my safety-deposit box."

He frankly smiled his incredulity.

"If you can spare the time to-morrow forenoon, may I ask you to accompany me to the village? You will remember that we made the trip once before. It was then that I took the ruby to the bank—under your very nose; this time we shall go and get it."

She rose and turned to depart. "Shall we say ten o'clock, then?"

Poole was on his feet. "I shall be quite ready whenever you like."

He watched her abruptly turn her back upon him and go quickly toward the house. A smile lurked

around the corners of his lips. Finally he sighed and muttered half aloud, "When it comes to a bluff she could give points to the others. What a pity to have to call it!"

Wherein it is manifest that Montgomery Poole, as an investigator, was indeed an amateur. A more experienced head would not have overlooked the possibility that the grossest fabrication may be capped with a bit of very hard, concrete fact.

CHAPTER XVI

THE motor-car came round the side of the house and halted before the veranda steps, while the engine continued to whir impatiently. In the driver's seat Evelyn sat waiting, her eyes intent upon her wrist-watch, which pointed exactly to the hour of ten. She had, in fact, lingered some minutes in the garage, watching the clock, in order to make this abrupt appearance at the exact minute.

Her mood this morning was one of stern precision. She had resolved that everything down to the least detail should be performed in precisely this spirit. Montgomery Poole had doubted her word. Therefore she would vindicate it quietly but crushingly to the last iota; she would drive him to the bank, place the ruby in his hands without comment, and then withdraw, leaving him speechless, chagrined, and thoroughly ashamed of his conduct. There was to be no discussion or verbal fencing during the ride. The issue between them was clean-cut: he had doubted her word; therefore she would show him firmly, quietly, and at once how completely his jaunty omniscience was mistaken. In that plight, without comment, she would leave him.

It was a not unpleasing program—his certain discomfiture and humiliation and embarrassment. As she contemplated in advance the crushing cumulative

effect of each step in the progress she felt a strange feminine satisfaction. That her recital to Poole on the preceding evening had had its origin in plausible and subtly arranged untruths had become first a secondary and now a wholly negligible consideration. In spite of its questionable beginning her recital had gradually emerged upon the hard, stable ground of truth—the fact of her actual possession of the ruby. That a tale should end in verifiable fact was, as her mind now perversely argued, sufficient justification for it. He had hastily, even flippantly chosen to doubt; with the fact, then, she would overwhelm him. It was to be a cold, orderly proceeding; over his downfall she resolved that she would betray no sign of triumph.

If she had thought by her prompt appearance with the car to catch him a few minutes late, so that she would be put to the obvious necessity of waiting for him, she was promptly disappointed. No sooner had the car come to a halt at the veranda steps than Poole appeared on the porch. Evelyn, without a word, threw open the door of the tonneau.

"Mayn't I sit in front?" he asked.

"If you like," she answered, briefly. With the same mechanical motion with which she had opened the door she drew it shut. Her hands on the steering-wheel, and her eyes directed straight ahead, she waited for him to circle the rear of the car and mount beside her. The moment he reached his seat the car shot forward.

"It's a bully morning, isn't it," said Poole, enthusiastically, as the car gained speed along the curve of the driveway, scudding past beds of bright-

starred phlox and larkspur, and the deep green masses of elms and maple aglint with light and shadow in the morning sunshine.

Evelyn accorded him three syllables in reply. "Beautiful," she coldly responded, and the car shot out upon the white macadam of the road.

Poole turned inquiringly toward her, and then paused. Six cylinders working in exquisite harmonic unison hummed blithely underneath. In the car itself there was silence.

A half-mile of road presently lay behind them.

"I say, you're cross with me," ventured the man.

"I am not in the least cross with you, Mr. Poole." The words came in crisp, even tones. And again silence. Poole sat staring down at the white stretch of fleeting macadam, his lips pursed in studious reflection.

He seemed effectively silenced. Not until the motor-car was threading the outskirts of the village did he again venture to speak. He began abruptly:

"Really you quite misunderstand me—"

"On the contrary, I understand you perfectly," she cut in, icily.

"But—"

"There is nothing for us to discuss, Mr. Poole."

And the motor-car drew up in front of the Wilton National Bank.

He sprang out on the sidewalk and waited to assist her; but, ignoring his outstretched hand, she dismounted on the other side of the car, and, lifting the hood, made a show of inspecting the cylinders of the engine. Mr. Ogilvie appeared at the door of the bank.

"Good morning, Miss Winthrop. Ah, Mr. Poole! Glad to see you again."

Poole lifted his hat, and Evelyn seized the moment to sweep by him and bestow upon the cashier a radiant greeting which struck Poole as being needlessly effusive. He followed them into the bank and into the directors' room, where Mr. Ogilvie with a flourish drew forward chairs.

"I want to get something from my safety-deposit box, if I may trouble you, Mr. Ogilvie," announced Evelyn. There was a little glow of color in her cheek, in anticipation of the approaching moment of triumph. Now for the first time she ventured a direct challenging glance at Poole, but he seemed wholly apathetic. He was sitting idly in a chair, his eyes vacantly fastened upon Mr. Ogilvie's very new patent-leather shoes.

"With pleasure," the latter was saying. "You have your key, Miss Winthrop? Then, will you step this way, please? Oh, Mr. Poole, you might be interested in seeing our newly equipped—"

"Thanks, but I've already—"

"Of course! Of course! How stupid of me! Very well, then, Miss Winthrop—"

Evelyn, with quickening pulses, produced her key from the bag she carried. Then she paused and looked uncertainly at Poole. She wanted him to go with her, that he might see with his own eyes that she had planned no trick, no stealthy insertion of the ruby in the box at the last moment. But he sat with eyes aloof, apparently indifferent to his approaching humiliation.

Abruptly Evelyn handed the key to the cashier.

"If you don't mind, will you have the box brought in here?"

"Why, our customers usually go into the vault themselves, but if you're willing to trust me—" he laughed volubly, and drawing from his pocket the control key of the safety-deposit boxes, he entered the vault. A moment later he reappeared bearing a black japanned box, which he placed on the table, and withdrew.

Evelyn turned to Poole, who was still sitting a little forward in his chair, his eyes abstractedly upon the door where Mr. Ogilvie's patent-leather shoes had flashed and glinted before they vanished from the room.

"Mr. Poole!"

"Yes, Miss Winthrop."

Evelyn lifted the japanned lid and took out the little jewel-box, which she pushed across the table to him. There was just a hint of vindictiveness in the brusque movement.

"Will you kindly examine *that?*" she asked, and leaned back to await his discomfiture.

Poole raised the lid of the little box and tilted it toward him. He scanned the contents for a moment. "Ah, yes, the diamonds," he said in expressionless tones, "they are indeed exquisite, as I remember saying when I admired them before."

"But the ruby!" Evelyn forced the issue upon him.

"The ruby?" Poole looked across the table at her inquiringly. "There is no ruby here."

"No ruby!" Evelyn started to her feet and leaned across the table.

"There is no ruby in this box, Miss Winthrop," repeated Poole.

She caught the box from his hand as he held it toward her, her fingers touching his own for a sharp instant. She fixed the contents of the box with incredulous eyes. Only the fifteen diamonds lay within it; the ruby was gone. She stood gazing blankly, speechlessly, at the stones. It was astounding, incredible, impossible.

With a quick movement she set down the jewels and snatched the safety-deposit box toward her, drawing out bonds, leases, stock certificates in haphazard haste, then impatiently dumping the whole contents upon the table.

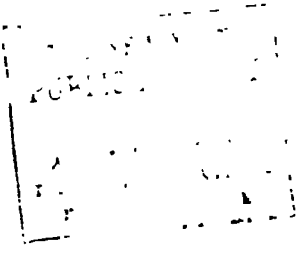
"It must be here! How could it have dropped out of the jewel-case? I haven't touched it since the day I put it here," she exclaimed, insistently. "Won't you please look through those papers, Mr. Poole? It simply *must* be here somewhere."

Poole leisurely assisted in the search. Certificates of deposit, government bonds, real-estate abstracts, mortgages, all were in turn opened and shaken. The corners of the box itself were minutely examined, then the bottom of the box and the lid. It was turned over, pounded, shaken, but the ruby failed to straggle forth from any hiding-place.

"There seems to be no ruby here, Miss Winthrop," said Poole in the same unmoved, patient voice.

She looked across at him in vague resentment and despair. Then as her eyes met his cool, questioning gray ones a slow dull red stole into her cheeks. She was powerless to check it. It mounted to her forehead, to her temples, reached into the depths of her

"THERE IS NO RUBY IN THIS BOX, MISS WINTHROP"



hair. A hot wave of confusion swept over her. Her confession, her artfully devised tale now rose before her in all its enormity. She had deceived him, and she had sought to bolster up the deception by the patent evidence of the ruby in her possession. But it had vanished. Some inexplicable mischance had placed her cruelly at his mercy. Now he would think that she was only acting a prearranged part.

"But I put it here. It *must* be here," she affirmed, frantically, restive under Poole's calm, incisive gaze. "How could it have been taken?" She surveyed the tumbled papers in despair. "Where can it be, Mr. Poole?" she finally demanded with a stamp of her foot. She was on the brink of bursting into tears.

"I am very sorry, Miss Winthrop," Poole began, consolingly.

"No, you're not," she cried, hysterically. "Inwardly you're simply shrieking with joy and gloating over me. You think I never did have the ruby—that I didn't put it here, when I did!" She looked helplessly toward him, and, meeting his quiet smile, she added abruptly, "Oh, I hate you!"

A pretty, flushed, tear-stained face confronted Poole. "I love you," he mentally replied, but outwardly he was still the placid, unmoved witness of her distress.

"You're laughing at me. I know you are," went on the tearful girl. "And you've no right to. I *did* have the ruby. I put it in this box with the diamonds, and I've never touched it since."

"Then it is incredible that it is not here now," said Poole, reflectively.

"You fail to show much surprise over the incredible," retorted the girl.

Poole made a light, disclaiming gesture. "The incredible has a way of happening frequently." He studied her face thoughtfully a moment. "When did you say you last examined this box?"

"I haven't been near it since that morning I brought the diamonds and the ruby to the bank."

"Under my nose, as I believe you said," added Poole, reminiscently. "This is a puzzle indeed." He took up the jewel-box. Evelyn silently watched him pour the diamonds out upon the table and then carefully inspect the little box, turning it over, testing its structure, studying the quaint inlay design upon the metal sides.

"There's certainly no magic or trap about the box, no false bottom or disappearing cavities," announced Poole. "It's just a plain box, although a rather charming piece of Japanese inlay work." He turned it over admiringly in his hands. "May I ask where you obtained it, Miss Winthrop?"

"Father gave it to me three or four years ago," answered Evelyn, dully. With her elbows on the table and her hands pressed to her cheeks she forlornly watched him, skeptical of his inquiry, wholly at a loss what new ground to take.

"It's a rare bit of Kamakura work. Your father must have valued it highly."

"No, he didn't," she flung back, impatiently. "I found it lying around in his laboratory, discarded in a clutter of odds and ends, and I decided to take it for a jewel-box. I remember he laughed at the idea; I had only one or two little trinkets then to keep in it. He said it had held a greater treasure than I would ever put into it."

Poole surveyed the fifteen diamonds on the table. "You're quite certain the ruby was in the box with the diamonds when you left them here?"

Evelyn flushed again. "I know you don't believe me, but it was," she retorted, haughtily.

"I mean," explained Poole, quickly, "couldn't the ruby have accidentally slipped out—say, during the ride, or before. You reassured yourself as to that at the last moment—when you placed them in the deposit box?"

"No," said Evelyn, "you were standing almost beside me talking to Mr. Ogilvie. I didn't dare look."

"Oh!" said Poole. "And during our drive to the bank—"

"There was no chance then, either, but I know the ruby was there," she answered, hopelessly.

"But as a matter of fact you never looked at the stones after leaving the house," persisted Poole.

Evelyn shook her head.

"How long before leaving the house—I mean, when did you last see the ruby?"

"When I put the jewel-case in my bag, I think. Just before I came out of the house to get into the runabout."

"And you didn't look into the box again?"

"No."

"And it wasn't out of your hands?"

"It was almost under yours," said Evelyn, fretful of his sharp fire of questions, and suddenly on her guard lest he should lead back to that part of her story which would not bear cross-examination.

"Where it was certainly secure against molestation." Poole calmly ignored the thrust.

"The box might have slipped open while in my bag, and the ruby fallen out," ventured Evelyn, with new and sudden hope.

"Hardly." Poole opposed the theory at once. "The lid of this box snaps shut by a spring. And if the ruby had tumbled out it's altogether unlikely that some of the diamonds would not have done the same. There were fifteen diamonds, I remember, and they are all here. As for the ruby being stolen while in the safety-deposit box—" Poole shrugged his shoulders and whistled softly. "The problem of who took it originally from the safe at the house, is nothing compared to this poser."

Evelyn's face colored. "I told you who took it from the safe."

"Oh, so you did. I had forgotten," said Poole.

"You think—you *do* think—that this is all a farce," she exclaimed, indignantly. "You don't believe me when I tell you I *did* put the ruby and the diamonds in the bank. Why are you trifling with me? Why don't you come out like a man, Mr. Poole, and say you don't believe me?" fumed Evelyn.

"But I *do* believe you," insisted Poole. "If I didn't think you put the ruby here, what would there be to puzzle over?"

"You're just pretending you're mystified—just for the pleasure of seeing me flounder more. I'm going to call Mr. Ogilvie in and report this loss—"

"I wouldn't," interposed Poole.

"I'll show you that I'm in earnest when I say that—"

"You don't need to."

"Some one in the bank has taken it out of the box," declared Evelyn, with sudden conviction. "There are sometimes thieves in banks, I've heard. Some clerk has taken it."

"How?" demanded Poole, bluntly.

"By stealing Mr. Ogilvie's key and opening the box, of course."

"Impossible. Granted that such a person had access to the bank's master-key, he could not open the deposit box without employing your key at the same time."

"But if he had a duplicate of my key," persisted Evelyn.

Poole shook his head. "Impossible," he repeated. "Besides, I fear you would greatly upset Mr. Ogilvie, which would be a pity."

"Aren't you a bit over-solicitous as to Mr. Ogilvie?" asked Evelyn, cuttingly.

"I should hate to see him in tears," retorted Poole, dryly.

"I dare say any masculine sympathy for me you would disapprove of. You're just as cold and heartless—oh, how can you sit there like that!—I *did* put the ruby in the box. Some one *has* taken it. I am going to tell Mr. Ogilvie at once!"

"But don't accuse him," cautioned Poole. "It's quite possible, you must admit, that the ruby slipped away before you reached the bank."

"I know you're perfectly incredulous as to the ruby ever being here at all. If you believed me you'd be eager to investigate this matter—"

"But I am eager."

"You don't show it. You're only wickedly elated

because you think this proves that I didn't have the ruby. If you really believed me—the truth—you'd be eager to question Mr. Ogilvie and get to the bottom of this miserable business."

"I'll put the question to Mr. Ogilvie, if you like."

"Please do so."

"And I'll make a further suggestion, if I may." Poole crossed the room and after rummaging in a desk returned to the table with some sheets of paper and a stick of sealing-wax. "To prevent further complications I suggest that we render the diamonds safe against any possible tampering in the future by making them into a packet and sealing them."

Evelyn watched him wrap the stones, first in a sheet of thin tissue, and then in heavier paper. Lighting a succession of matches, he allowed the wax to drip into round red splotches covering the ends of the folds. He completed the operation by imprinting the soft wax with the seal-ring from his finger.

"At least we'll be sure of the diamonds from now on," he said, finally. Then he summoned Mr. Ogilvie.

"Miss Winthrop left here some small unset stones in this little Japanese box the last time she was here," he explained to the cashier. "One of them—a ruby—seems strangely to have disappeared."

"Impossible!" gasped Mr. Ogilvie.

"I have already assured Miss Winthrop that the box could not have been tampered with—"

"Absolutely impossible!" reiterated the cashier. "It is a physical impossibility to open the boxes

without simultaneously inserting in the locks the customer's key and the control key."

"Exactly. We may dismiss that at once. You see, Miss Winthrop cannot be absolutely certain that the missing stone was in the jewel-case. She did not examine it before finally placing it in the box. Either during the trip to the bank or before, it might have escaped from the others—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Ogilvie, with evident relief.

"So that our search is rather elsewhere than here," concluded Poole.

"I am deeply grieved to hear of this loss," said Mr. Ogilvie, turning to Evelyn. "But you may have implicit confidence in the privacy and security of our vaults."

"Really, it's of no consequence, Mr. Ogilvie."

"But I am so sorry—".

"You mustn't think of it, pray. I thought the ruby was in the box, but as Mr. Poole says, it could very well have been lost beforehand. I beg of you not to think further of it."

"But I want to think further of it. If I can be of any assistance—"

Evelyn bestowed a smile upon the obsequious cashier. She had returned the papers to the box, and now placed within it the sealed packet of diamonds. "It's all due to my own carelessness in carrying the stones around loose." She rose to her feet. "If I may put this box back in the vault now—"

When Evelyn returned to where Poole awaited her she coldly regarded him.

"I cannot say your examination of Mr. Ogilvie was very searching."

"But, Miss Winthrop," protested Poole, "you took the whole affair out of my hands. Besides, it's absurd to question the bank's integrity—"

"Which only proves that you do question mine," she cut in, decisively. "We will go now."

The motor-car retraced its course from the village, but it moved along at a fitful pace, while Evelyn's thoughts vainly struggled with the dilemma in which she seemed so hopelessly to have enmeshed herself.

She realized now the folly of her first duplicity, but she bewailed not so much this indiscretion as the ironical trick which Fate had played her. With the stone itself as proof, he must perforce have believed her; no matter how astute he might be, the ruby reposing in her safety-deposit box must have completely upset his theories. Only a miracle—an astounding, incredible mystery—had delivered him out of her hands. After all, how lucky he was! And she pictured with vexatious resentment the restrained gleeful triumph of the young man beside her. Poole was humming a flippant song, which in her present mood annoyed her.

"I do wish you would stop that dreadful tune!" she burst out, at length.

By way of complying, Poole laughed and launched forth into the words.

"I say," he ended, abruptly, "I've a bit of business over in Burwick. Would you mind motoring me over?"

"If you like," she replied, abjectly, and relapsed again into her discomforting thoughts. Presently the cylinders throbbed louder as the car began to climb the steep slope of the Saddle-back. Soon they

were across the ridge, and the Burwick valley came into view.

What was he meditating now, she wondered. Clearly, the strange disappearance of the ruby at the bank he seemed to take very lightly. But that was because he wholly disbelieved her. How exasperating the whole situation had become! Must she confess everything? Ignominiously retract her story *in toto?* Instinctively she rebelled at such abject surrender. Even if she confessed, the bare truth would compel acceptance of this impossible disappearance of the ruby at the bank. Manifestly, he could never believe that, and yet her confession would require him to take on trust this last incredible, inexplicable event. He would naturally think she was abandoning one untruth merely to clutch at another which was, of the two, the more absurd. Escape seemed hopeless, and meanwhile the thought of her first deliberate deception began to weigh more heavily upon her.

The recollection of the triumphant mood in which she had started out that morning assailed her. She lowered her head, and her lips tightened. Poole was still humming his teasing song, making no secret, apparently, of his joy in her disaster. He seemed to think he had outwitted her; but he had not. The ruby had been taken to the bank. After all, she suddenly reflected, here at least his self-assurance might cause him to blunder. Incredulous as he was of her once having had the ruby, his theories, whatever they were, would fall awry because of this unbelief in her. The thought gave her a scanty satisfaction. Perhaps by this extraordinary turn of

events Jack's part in the affair would be more safely guarded from discovery. Let this confident young man go wrong, then, as much as he pleased. So long as she revealed nothing, Jack was secure. In the mean time, however, between them lay her first dishonesty. That had still to be faced—yes, and endured. But that mischievous light that now lurked in his eyes! She raged inwardly at him and at herself.

"I know you want to get rid of me," said Poole, when they were at length in the main street of Burwick, "so I'll drop off here, and thank you very much for bringing me over."

She brought the motor-car to a halt beside the curbing. "Don't you want me to wait for you?" she asked, apathetically.

"No; you mustn't bother. I may have to do some scurrying around," he told her indefinitely.

Still she lingered, unwilling to allow the intolerable *status quo* between them to stand without a further word.

"You think I've deceived you, and that this—this farce proves it."

"But I don't think it proves it," protested Poole, smiling.

"Then why do you look at me in that way?"

"In what way?"

"In the way you do."

Poole laughed. "I don't believe I understand. But you mustn't think I doubt you."

"Then you believe what I have told you?" she queried, skeptically.

"Yes, and what more you may have to tell me."

"What more?" echoed Evelyn. "What more is there to tell?"

Poole studied the curbing at his feet. Then he looked up. "You've never told me why you so carefully trod out the footprints under the window of your room that morning," he said, significantly. Without waiting for her reply he raised his hat in farewell. With a speechless, bewildered nod she turned the car about and drove off.

Once alone upon the sidewalk, Poole's vague intentions of "scurrying around" resolved themselves into an immediate advance toward a jewelry shop on the main street, above which hung the sign "T. Lambrick—Watches, Diamonds." He paused for a desultory survey of the show-window, and, reaching into his waistcoat pocket, he made sure of the two rubies which Colonel Winthrop and Archie had given him on the previous evening. A thoughtful frown crossed his face as his fingers touched the stones.

"Unless I am very much mistaken—" he mused to himself. "At any rate, it's worth trying at a hazard." Then he boldly entered the shop. The proprietor, a thin, spectacled man, came forward behind the show-cases.

"My name is Poole," began the visitor. "I'm staying at the Winthrops'."

"Oh yes, Mr. Poole, I remember," the jeweler nodded, pleasantly. "You were in a couple of weeks ago, I believe, and looked over our assortment of rubies."

"Quite right," agreed Poole. "I'm here this time on a little errand not my own." He produced the ruby which Colonel Winthrop had given him.

"Colonel Winthrop isn't quite suited with this," he ventured, then paused, examining the stone, while he awaited results.

"So I feared. He seemed a little doubtful about it yesterday," put in the jeweler. "There was some question, he said, as to its matching another stone."

"Exactly," said Poole, now satisfied that his presumptions were correct and that he had traced the stone back to its source. "It doesn't match, I'm sorry to say, and if it's possible to return it—" Poole looked inquiringly at the jeweler.

"Certainly," assented the other, taking the ruby from Poole. "There need be no hesitation about returning it. I'll strike it off the account, if you'll be so good as to tell Colonel Winthrop."

Poole nodded. "Colonel Winthrop will thank you very much for your trouble."

"The fact is my stock of rubies just now is rather limited," went on Mr. Lambrick, taking a shallow, plush-lined drawer from the safe behind him and laying it upon the show-case, "as you observed yourself when you were here and looked them over the other day. But I hope to have a new consignment by the first of the month, and if you will tell Colonel Winthrop—"

"I shall be glad to do so," interjected Poole.

"Perhaps then I can suit him," finished the jeweler. "Curiously enough, Mr. Archie Winthrop was in here too, yesterday, looking at rubies, my assistant tells me."

"Yes," said Poole, drawing the other ruby from his pocket. "I'm intrusted with a like commission in regard to this stone."

"Very well, he's quite free to return it. I should think this a poorer match than the other," said the jeweler, taking the second ruby from Poole. "Then they were both endeavoring to match the same stone?" he inquired, looking at Poole over his glasses.

"Yes, although quite independently of each other, as it happens."

"Had I been in when Mr. Archie Winthrop called, I could have explained to him that the ruby Colonel Winthrop had taken was more likely to prove what was wanted; but my assistant, who waited on him, was quite ignorant of the other transaction."

"It's no matter," replied Poole. "We're really very much indebted to you for offering us the stones, and if I may leave them with you—"

"I'll cancel both charges."

"Thank you," said Poole. "And if it wouldn't be troubling you too much, will you drop a line to Colonel Winthrop and also to Mr. Archie Winthrop informing each that the matter is closed."

"I'll acknowledge the return of the stones by to-night's mail," Mr. Lambrick readily consented.

"They will both be very grateful to you, I am sure," concluded Poole. He did not leave the shop at once. Leaning over the show-case, he tapped the glass with his finger. "Would you mind showing me this tray—this one with the silver cigar-cutters?"

CHAPTER XVII

WITH flaming cheeks and ears still tingling from the sound of Poole's final words, Evelyn guided the motor-car down the main street of Burwick and out into the open country.

"You've never told me why you so carefully trod out the footprints under the window of your room that morning." The words in all their ominous significance kept insistently repeating themselves to her. So he had noticed the footprints and the efforts she had made to efface them when, on the morning after the robbery, she had slipped away from the breakfast-table and, making a detour of the house, had tried to stamp out the evident signs on the soft earth of Jack's midnight egress from her window. How foolish it now seemed to think that Mr. Poole would have failed to notice the obliterated telltale marks, and how careless she had been in leaving unmistakable evidence of her own complicity! But at the time she had not yet come to know that hawk-like alertness and searching scrutiny of his which nothing seemed to escape. Of course he had seen and noted the marks. However, if the prints of her own shoes were evident there could hardly be any question that the marks beneath them had been effectually effaced; at best he could only venture a guess as to whose footprints she had taken such pains to obscure.

But clearly, she now realized, he had all along known that she was endeavoring to shield some one from him, to balk his efforts in the quest. And whom would he suspect that person to be?

She saw now how he must have divined at once, in her further deception on the preceding evening, her intent again to mislead him. All along, she reflected, while he seemed to trust her, he had been warily on his guard. When he made a show of seeking her aid, he had known her secretly leagued against him.

With her dismay over this revelation of his true attitude toward her came a gulping feeling in her throat. Could it be that she had engaged his interest—and she knew him at least interested in her—only because of her connection with the theft of the ruby, because of her endeavors to deceive him, and the secret knowledge which had prompted these endeavors? Was she in his thoughts only a part of the puzzle he was trying to solve? Was it her secret, and not herself, that had led him to devote himself so assiduously to her during the past fortnight? For a moment the macadam road grew misty before her, and she slowed the car to a crawling pace. Had he really no interest in her beyond that?

And yet the recollection of their hour in the canoe—it was only yesterday morning, but it now seemed ages remote—swept reassuringly back upon her. For that hour he had certainly been himself, she thrilled to remember. He had been like a boy with heart and soul open only to the beauty of the young day and to her. And he had eagerly dismissed the problem that beset him as something alien and out of place in the intimacy of that mo-

ment. His vague and disquieting words as to what might happen later, they had seemed dubious and cryptic then, but now they echoed in her ears as a protest and reassurance to her heart against just such a hostile pass as this to which they had come.

"What a fool I was to ever try to deceive him! I could have said nothing honestly, but I deliberately set about tricking him, and now I've simply perjured myself, and he knows it," she lamented. "What can he think of me? And what am I to do now? Go to him and confess how wicked I've been? Tell him everything? But I can't tell him about Jack! I can't do that, no matter how dreadful he thinks I am!"

Suddenly her remorseful thoughts were interrupted by a loud, shrieking call from behind. She swerved to the right just as a large touring-car overtook her and shot past at a terrific pace amid the jeering cries of its four male occupants. The big machine tore noisily on, lifting a huge streamer of dust in its wake.

"They'll kill somebody, or even themselves, driving in that fashion," exclaimed Evelyn, frowning after the fast-disappearing car. "There's a man now!"—she caught her breath—"Goodness! He'll be caught! . . . Oh!—he's fallen!"

Upon a low bridge which spanned the brook below, a man on foot, startled by the shrieking siren call, had turned confusedly as the car bore down upon him. Caught unawares on the narrow platform, he had started back toward the road, then, seeing that he could not reach it in time, he sprang frantically to the railing as the car thundered by.

The momentum of his leap, or the sudden fright, caused him to lose his balance; he clutched vainly at the railing, then fell rolling down the embankment.

Evelyn, throwing wide the throttle, raced forward. The other machine, unwitting or unmindful of the accident, was already vanishing down the road in a great whirl of dust. Reaching the bridge, Evelyn halted and leaped from the car. In the gully, a dozen feet below, lay the fallen man, feebly struggling to rise. A glance told her that he must be seriously hurt. Disregardful of skirt or shoes, Evelyn descended, half sliding, half slipping, down the embankment to where the injured man lay. He was a young fellow of about twenty-five, dressed in the rough clothes of a laborer, brown of face and hands. He looked up dazedly at Evelyn's precipitate approach, surprise for a moment showing above the painful quivering of his face. A thin stream of blood trickled from a ragged cut across his forehead.

"You must be badly hurt!" said Evelyn, anxiously.

The man winced as he gave over his efforts to rise and felt of his leg. "It's broken, I guess."

"I thought surely you were killed."

The man glanced at her curiously.

"It wasn't you—in that car?"

"No, they've gone—never stopped to look back. A car full of men going at a horribly reckless pace. I saw you fall, and came up as quickly as I could."

"Damn them!" the man muttered, with set teeth, between twinges of pain. "I'd like to get hold of 'em—"

"It's an outrage," declared Evelyn, "and it's a perfect miracle that you weren't killed." Then her

"Why, yes," said Evelyn, looking back, a little surprised. "Then you know me?"

"I haven't seen you in a long time, but I thought you was Miss Winthrop."

Evelyn scanned more closely the young man's face, which at moments had seemed half familiar to her. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"Oh yes — a long time ago. My name's Joe Spurling."

"Joe Spurling! Oh, of course! I remember you now. Your father—he used to work for us—and you lived in Wilton."

The young man nodded. "That's me."

The machine had regained the road once more, and as it sped smoothly along Evelyn turned again to survey more closely her charge.

"But you were only a boy then."

"You was some smaller yourself," returned Spurling.

"And do you live around here now?"

"No'm. Dad still keeps to his camp up in the woods, but I've been roamin' around a good deal. I just got back to-day to Burwick—and was on my way to Dad's place when that infernal machine come along."

"It's just too bad!" exclaimed Evelyn. "And if your leg is really broken you'll be laid up for weeks. I'm so sorry, Mr. Spurling!"

"You've been mighty good to me," returned the young man, feelingly.

"I wish I could really do something for you," Evelyn hesitated. "I don't like carting you off to a hospital this way."

"It's the best place for me in this fix," muttered Spurling. "I've got no home around here, and Dad's place is worse than none."

"I'll let him know about you at once," said Evelyn.

"Thanks, Miss Winthrop, but you've done too much already for me. I can get word to him," protested Spurling.

In its course to the hospital the machine kept to the main street of Burwick, where Evelyn and her strange charge frequently attracted a curious, staring eye.

Spurling was keenly sensitive to the spectacle they presented. "I oughtn't to be riding in this car with you," he protested feebly. "Everybody's staring and wondering what you are up to. If you went down the side-streets—"

"Nonsense! Let them stare if they want to. I'm going to get you to the hospital by the quickest route, and I don't care what these silly people think. And I shall come over to see how you get along—"

As Evelyn looked back at him reassuringly her words broke off in alarm. Under the continued assaults of the pain he had so bravely borne Spurling's face had become a sickly white. His head now fell forward on his chest in a faint. Reaching back one arm to steady him, Evelyn threw the throttle to the last notch. Six cylinders raised a low plaintive whine as the car leaped forward.

At the entrance to the Burwick Hospital white-uniformed attendants rushed out to Evelyn's assistance as she brought the panting engine to a halt.

He was awfully plucky, though! I managed to get him into the car, and took him to the Burwick Hospital—"

"Bully for you, Evie!" interrupted her uncle.

"I couldn't have done less," protested Evelyn. "His leg *was* broken—in two places. I waited at the hospital to find out. And who do you think it was? Joe Spurling."

"Joe Spurling?" echoed Archie.

"That old codger that used to live by himself up in the woods?" asked Jack.

"No; his son. Don't you remember him? He once worked for us on the Fenwick farm."

"Oh, that chap," replied Jack. "I remember him now. Hard luck to get mashed up in that fashion."

"He'll be in the hospital for two months, the doctor told me. He's got no home—no one to look after him. I had a great notion to bring him here."

"Great Scott, Evie!" Jack remonstrated. "Do you think we are running a sanitarium? We couldn't have him around here."

"You could and would if I had brought him," retorted Evelyn, calmly. "I suppose, though, the hospital is the best place. I'm going over every day to see how he gets along. And, Jack, I want you, please, to go up to the Saddle-back and find old Mr. Spurling and tell him."

"What! Search out that old poacher? Not on your life," replied Jack, amiably. "He'd probably shoot me on sight if he's still nursing the old grudge he used to have against me."

"What grudge?"

"Why, don't you remember? I had him chased off our land that autumn when Bob Harley and Duff Merrick were up here for a couple of weeks' shooting. He was scaring everything shootable off the place."

"That wasn't very nice of you," said Evelyn.

"It was legal," retorted her brother.

"Trust Jack to protect the family rights," put in Archie, dryly.

"Just the same, you are to go up and tell him about the accident," continued Evelyn.

"Not on your life," reiterated Jack, serenely. "I've been playing tennis all morning, and I'm dead tired. I'm going out to the bungalow now for a much needed siesta," and, lighting a cigarette, he strolled from the table.

"Jack, you must go," Evelyn insisted.

"Nothing doing, sis. Sorry."

"I'll go," volunteered Archie.

"Will you?" Evelyn looked across gratefully at her cousin.

"But you'll have to go along to show me the way. I'd never find it."

"It's somewhere near the Saddle-back. He's got a little house in the woods and lives all alone. We'll go together in the car."

"Hullo, there comes Poole," exclaimed Jack, from the window. "Lathrop's driving him up from the village."

"You've missed lunch and the chance of your life," Jack assailed Poole, when the latter entered the dining-room a few minutes later.

"I'm sorry. I had counted on missing lunch,"

said Poole, looking curiously around the circle, "but what else have I missed?"

"Why, Evelyn's back here with the wildest tale you ever heard, about how she rescued a chap knocked off a bridge by an automobile and carried him in a dead faint over to the Burwick Hospital."

Poole shot a surprised look at Evelyn, whose glance fell before his to the cup of cold consommé that Grimes insisted on setting before her.

"Mr. Poole is skeptical of my tales," she said, frigidly, and rose from the table, quite ignoring him. "Can you come now, Archie?"

The latter nodded and followed her from the dining-room.

Jack looked curiously at Poole. "Has she been having a row with you, too?" he demanded.

"Not that I know of," replied Poole, soberly.

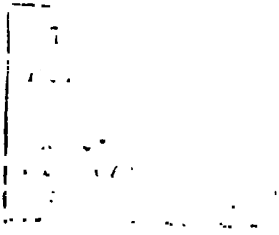
"Well, that remark she handed you certainly came out of cold storage," went on Jack. "I'm pretty well acquainted with her chilled products in that line. Let me tell you, you're in bad, for some reason or other. Well, good night, everybody. I'm off for a snooze." He paused at the doorway. "Play you tennis at four o'clock, Poole."

"Not this afternoon, Jack." Poole shook his head with a frown. "I'm going to be—busy."

"Well, by-by, then," and he sauntered off.

Alone with Colonel Winthrop, Poole inquired for details, and the Colonel told him briefly the story of the accident, failing to mention, however, the name of the injured man. "Evie's a plucky one," he concluded. "She'd stand by the worst creature that

"MR. POOLE IS SKEPTICAL OF MY TALES," SHE SAID FRIGIDLY



ever breathed if he was in a tight place. She's loyal —she's true blue."

Staring dismally at the half-emptied coffee cups that Grimes was removing, Poole digested this remark. While not questioning Colonel Winthrop's assertion in any way, he vainly tried to adjust it with his own recent experiences at Evelyn's hands. From outside came the whirring of the motor, and, glancing out of the window, Poole saw the motor-car, with Evelyn and Archie in it, rounding the driveway toward the road. He had a fleeting glimpse of her face turned toward her cousin and beaming upon him in girlish joy. Poole drew a very new silver cigar-cutter from his pocket and snipped the end of his cigar vindictively.

"What's the matter with you? You don't look very chipper," observed Colonel Winthrop. "Aren't things looking up?"

Poole glumly puffed his cigar to a glow. "I'll be damned if I know which way things are looking," he said, morosely.

The Colonel eyed him covertly. "I really believe I've stumped him with that ruse of mine," he told himself. "If I have, that ruby was an inspiration, and about the best investment I ever made!"

He waited, half anticipating that Poole would revert to their talk of the evening before, and adroitly ready, after a morning's rehearsal with himself, to meet the searching questions that the latter might put to him. But Poole was silent. The subject seemed to have passed altogether from his mind.

"Well, I sha'n't start it," Colonel Winthrop discreetly resolved. He was not altogether disap-

pointed that the cross-examination was not to be immediately forthcoming, and he was soon regaling Poole with one of his experiences in the Philippines.

The Colonel's little tale over at last, Poole sauntered out into the yard. He wandered aimlessly about for a while, shaking his head in a curt negation, when Kenji Kato ventured to approach and suggest a game of *go*, and finally betook himself to the laboratory in the bungalow, where in a fit of amateur research he strove to drive away his thoughts among the test-tubes and retorts. Gradually he became deeply absorbed in some experiment. The minutes, unmarked, became hours. It was not until the afternoon was far spent, and the chug-chug of the motor-car coming up the drive announced the return of Evelyn and Archie, that Poole gave over his impromptu puttering in the laboratory.

But he left the bungalow in a very different mood from that in which he had entered it. As he walked back to the house there was a new light in his eyes, his face was frankly beaming. He strode along so preoccupied in his elation that, coming upon Evelyn near the nasturtium-beds, he was guilty of passing her with only the most absent nod of greeting. It should have been obvious to him that she had paused expectantly, perhaps wishing to make some tenders of peace after the hostilities of the morning; yet he had continued abruptly on. She looked back sharply at him. In spite of the scene at the bank and her tart remark at the luncheon-table, she had hardly expected quite this retaliation from him. During the afternoon with Archie she had been preparing for this encounter. She had mentally

rehearsed various speeches and various attitudes without finally deciding which would best fit the occasion. On the whole, she had left her cue to be taken from his own behavior toward her when they should meet, secretly feeling that somehow they would "make it up," and deep in her heart longing for that outcome. But he had passed her with the most indifferent nod, a rapt, beatific look in his eye as if he had been caught up and away from earth. The worst of it was that her sudden appearance had failed utterly to bring him back to this world.

Impulsively she called after him, "Mr. Poole!"

He turned and looked inquiringly back. "Yes, Miss Winthrop?"

At a loss for words, she hesitated, instantly regretting that she had stopped him.

"What *have* you been doing?" She now noticed that his clothes and hands were stained with chemicals, and seized upon this fact for want of something better.

Following her glance, he looked at his clothes and laughed. "Oh, I've been messing around in the laboratory—got so blissfully absorbed in some experiments that I quite forgot that I was making a mess of myself, too. He brushed a long streak of $MgSO_4$ from his sleeve and exhibited his hands stained with some brownish liquid.

"I'm glad the afternoon didn't hang heavily on your hands, even if the chemicals did," said Evelyn, stiffly. For some feminine reason she resented the fact that he had enjoyed himself; she had not.

"Far from it," answered Poole. "And yours?"

"Oh, Archie and I had a beautiful motor-ride," she told him, a trifle loftily.

"I knew you would have," replied Poole, affably, and turned away.

Evelyn bit her lips, quite provoked, and proceeded in the other direction. As a matter of fact, she had not enjoyed the afternoon's ride. She had found Archie in a tender and sentimental mood which of late was becoming more and more distasteful to her, and this in spite of the fact that she had set out with a desperate resolve to flirt outrageously with him that afternoon. They had dutifully sought out old Mr. Spurling, acquainted him with his son's accident, and then taken a long motor-ride through the hills. But Archie's attentions had palled upon her; she had been really miserable, distressed over the events of the morning with Poole, and at heart contrite for her sarcastic fling at him in the dining-room. Her one consolation had been the hope that her words had made him miserable too. To all appearances, however, he had completely put her out of his mind to find strange, incomprehensible satisfaction among a lot of dusty test-tubes and acrid, ill-smelling chemicals.

She rounded the house, and flung into her room, where, before dressing for dinner, she gave herself up to long and serious thought. Then she sat down impulsively at her desk, and after one or two unsuccessful starts she hastily wrote a note and addressed it to Poole.

The latter, having proceeded to his room, where he spent considerable time removing from his hands the traces of his afternoon's occupation, was get-

ting into his clothes when Grimes knocked at his door.

"A note for you, sir," said the butler.

"All right, Grimes, let's have it."

Poole, recognizing the characteristic feminine handwriting, eagerly tore the missive open.

DEAR MR. OMNISCIENCE,—I did fib to you last night. And I'm sorry I did it. I'll tell you everything—that is, everything that really happened so far as I know—whenever you say I must. E. W.

Poole despatched two lines in reply:

Then I fear you will never tell me, for I will never say "you must." If you *choose* to tell me, I am yours to command at any time. M. P.

Which presently brought this reply *via* Grimes, five minutes later:

"I go canoeing at six-thirty to-morrow morning."

Whereupon Poole, taking a little clock from the dressing-table, set the alarm for five-forty-five A.M.

CHAPTER XIX

PRECISELY at the hour of six an alarm-clock at the head of Evelyn's bed broke into a strident call, only to be instantly and ignominiously silenced by Evelyn's outstretched hand. At six-twenty-five she was standing before her window dressed for her morning excursion, and looking out upon the promise of a clear day. It was on just such a morning that she had gone canoeing two days before, but as she looked out upon the soft green of earth and trees and caught the dewy freshness of the air against her cheek she realized how vastly this occasion differed from the other. But she refused to anticipate the outcome of the hour immediately at hand. "It's a good morning for a row, and I need the exercise," she told herself, resolutely. And in a certain exuberance of healthful spirits which seemed to demand some erratic outlet for her cramped emotions she swung bodily over the window-sill and dropped lightly to the grass.

"Am I on time?"

Evelyn, startled at the words, turned to find Poole approaching along the nasturtium-beds. She colored at the thought that he had witnessed her unconventional mode of departure from the house, and then flung all embarrassment from her with a merry laugh. "You're ahead of time, but I'll forgive you."

She pointed to the grass beneath the window, and added lightly, "You see I have been making more footprints for you."

"Then the footprints were yours — the other time?"

"No, they weren't," replied Evelyn, quickly, having resolved overnight to speak nothing but the truth henceforth and forever. "But let's not talk about that just yet."

Poole fell into step with her across the lawn minutely crystaled with dew. He was wearing a suit of white flannels and white canvas shoes. He had no hat. From the soft negligée collar of his shirt hung a knitted scarf of navy-blue. Evelyn regarded him circumspectly, approving his simple morning toilet.

"Do you know you're a horribly punctual man?" she said, reflectively. "And I don't know whether to like it or not."

"You shouldn't," said Poole. "It's a habit I once got into which I've tried my best to outgrow. But up here in your glorious country air it's impossible not to get up with the birds. And, naturally, this morning of all mornings"—he looked significantly at her—"you couldn't expect me to sleep. I needed no alarm-clock—"

Evelyn stopped short. "What a fib! I heard it go off myself—at five-forty-five."

"But I was wide awake and waiting for it," insisted Poole.

Which fact Evelyn could not well gainsay. "Anyhow—you take fifteen minutes longer to dress than I do," she observed.

They had reached the boat-house, and the topic fell away while they were engaged in carrying out and launching the canoe. Then there ensued an argument as to where each should sit, which resulted, after Evelyn's insistence on being allowed to paddle, in Poole's taking the bow. The tiny cedar craft glided noiselessly out upon the mirror-like sheet of water. Evelyn presently paused, paddle in hand, to survey the dark dreaming woods along the shore.

"This is a strange place for a confessional," she began.

"But of your own choosing," ventured Poole.

"I know." She dipped again into the heavy, sleeping water. "By the way, it was very nice of you to answer my note in the way you did."

"It was very nice of you to write the note," answered Poole. And again there was silence as the canoe gradually crossed the lake and skirted along the drowsy, wooded shore, deep with shadows.

"You will find it very difficult to believe some of the things I am going to tell you," Evelyn began, at length.

"But I have never found it so," replied Poole, quickly.

"That's because you've never before had to take me on faith. You've always taken me on suspicion."

Poole smiled.

"I deliberately deceived you last night—"

"But you didn't," interrupted Poole.

Evelyn bit her lips, but continued humbly. "At least, I meant to deceive you. But, please believe, I meant it all for the best, and it seemed best at the time."

"Then it doubtless was."

"Now, don't interrupt again, or I'll get cross with you. And you're starting off by agreeing with me in all too sugary fashion. To begin with, I didn't take the ruby. It was gone when I first looked at the stones that morning after the burglary."

Poole made no answer.

"You will readily believe that. What you will find it hard to believe, and yet what you must believe, is that I *did* have the ruby when we went to the bank that same morning to leave it there."

"All of which I have never doubted," said Poole.

"What!" exclaimed Evelyn. "You really believed me yesterday when I said I had left the ruby at the bank, in the very face of its strange, unaccountable disappearance?"

"Absolutely," answered her companion. "I knew that you were telling me the truth. You couldn't speak as you did and not be telling the truth. I chose instantly to accept as possible an incredible mystery rather than doubt your word. But aren't we getting ahead of the story? Won't you tell me how you got hold of the ruby after—as we all thought —it had been stolen?"

A troubled look crossed Evelyn's face. She hesitated, looked appealingly at Poole, and then said briefly:

"I found it in Jack's clothes, in his room out in the bungalow that morning."

"Hm!" said Poole, composedly, watching the water drip from her lifted paddle. "And have you any theory as to who put it there?"

Evelyn's eyebrows lifted in new insight and aston-

ishment. "Who put it there? I never once thought of anything like that! I thought, of course, that Jack had taken it."

"That doesn't necessarily follow. Perhaps you were a trifle hasty in suspecting Jack."

"Then you don't suspect him?"

"I shouldn't want to on such circumstantial evidence without looking into it pretty closely."

"But what else could I think? I had gone into his room while he was out on the tennis-court. There were his clothes scattered carelessly around, his coat flung down on a table by the window, and my jewel-box all but tumbling from one of the pockets, and the diamonds half spilled out. I gathered them together, and then, to make sure that I had them all, I turned the coat upside down and gave it a shake. Out of the other pockets dropped one or two things—a memorandum-book and a pipe, I remember—and the ruby."

Poole's eyes narrowed thoughtfully upon the distant shore. "Which in no way disproves the possibility that the ruby had been put into his pocket by some one else."

Evelyn gave a little laugh that was almost a sob. "To think that I should never have thought of that! And this is what I've been keeping from you all the time. I didn't want you to suspect Jack, and I was so afraid that you would. And now you don't suspect him at all!"

"I don't say I don't suspect him at all. Naturally, his having the ruby in his clothes has to be taken into account. But I should want some further evidence—"

"I'm afraid I must furnish it," said Evelyn, with a sigh. "You said I hadn't explained whose footprints I had stamped out underneath my window that morning. They were Jack's."

"You are sure?" queried Poole, sharply.

Evelyn sorrowfully nodded, then told him in detail the story of her discovery of Jack in the library and his stealthy departure from the house by means of her window. As she spoke Poole hung intently upon every word, his eyes alight with keen interest, his brow contracting and lifting by turns as he received and weighed each detail of her story. When she had finished he pondered for some moments in silence, and then broke out with a laugh:

"So—you've made out quite a case against Jack."

"But you don't think so?" she interrogated, astonished that he should take the matter so lightly.

His shoulders lifted abruptly, and his hands made their little familiar gesture of non-committal. "I cannot say—just now. But I am surprised that you have been at such pains to keep these facts from me. Tell me, Miss Winthrop, do you think it was worth the trouble?"

"I'm not sure that I understand what you mean," said Evelyn, doubtfully. "But I knew, I felt right along, that you would find all this out sooner or later."

"Then why this determined effort to put me off the track?"

Evelyn flushed a little. "You mean—what was my real motive?"

"Precisely."

Evelyn's troubled eyes searched the shadows along

the shore. "I wish you wouldn't ask me that, Mr. Poole. If I acted desperately, you must know that it was because I felt desperately—" The paddle fell clattering to the bottom of the canoe as Evelyn clasped her hands impulsively together and looked beseechingly toward him. "I may as well be frank with you at once, for I know you will respect my confidence. At times I cannot help feeling that Jack deliberately took the money and the ruby, not in fun, but for a purpose of his own."

Poole frowned.

"Now I have told you everything," Evelyn went on, "even my own secret fear that I never dreamed of revealing to you. If Jack is guilty, Mr. Poole, can't you straighten matters out so that—I mean, if he has acted from an unworthy motive, won't you prevent that fact from coming out?"

Poole's eyebrows lifted. "Do you know what they call such a proposal in a court of justice?"

"Oh, something dreadful, I suppose," answered Evelyn, impatiently. "But this is not a court of justice, Mr. Poole. This is just a little, happy, loving family circle into which you have come, where each one has his faults and weaknesses. I am pleading with you to be generous rather than just, and, if wrong has been done, to spare the wrong-doer even at the cost of your own triumph."

Poole made a disclaiming gesture.

"No; listen to me," Evelyn continued. "Your intervention in this affair may prove to be the best thing that could have happened. I want you to talk to Jack—I believe you have more influence over him than any of us. Only set *him* right, and you shall

have my unbounded gratitude, Mr. Poole. It will be a noble deed and a finer thing than the most clever unraveling of any mystery."

"If it's plumb up to Jack in the way you mean," said Poole, soberly, "I'll do what I can."

Evelyn rewarded him with a smile from misty eyes.

"But I am not at all certain that Jack's the villain in this piece. Does any one share your suspicions?"

"Only Uncle Geoff."

"Oh, he knows, then?"

Evelyn nodded. "He knows what I've told you."

"Why don't you speak to Jack?"

"I did, or rather Uncle Geoff did. It only made matters worse. He refused to confess or deny."

"What? After you had told him that you had found the ruby in his clothes?"

"Oh no! I kept that back. I couldn't even tell Uncle that. You are the only person, Mr. Poole, that knows that the ruby was found and where. But Uncle told Jack about my seeing him steal into the library. He wouldn't explain. He was really sullen and resentful over it. He challenged you to go ahead and do your worst. Uncle was most distressed."

A slow smile played at the corners of Poole's mouth. "Then I begin to understand why Colonel Winthrop so obligingly took the credit of the whole affair upon his own shoulders the other night. In fact, he delivered over to me the ruby as proof that he had stolen it."

"The ruby!"

"Not *the* ruby—but one he had purchased at a shop over in Burwick. It proved a fair substitute, but it happens that I had examined all the rubies in

that shop two weeks ago, and I immediately suspected the antecedents of that particular stone."

"Did you tell him?"

"No, I left that to the jeweler. Then your cousin Archie very obligingly insinuated that he was the burglar and handed over the ruby—another obtained from the same jeweler's stock. And right on the heels of all this came the pleasure of listening to your own little confession—"

"Please, Mr. Poole!"

"Very well, then. But have you any idea why your cousin Archie should voluntarily take the thing upon himself?"

"Only to puzzle you, I'm sure. I know the idea occurred to him the other day to try to add some new complication to the mystery, as if it were not bad enough already. But I didn't know he had really done anything."

"Well, we are fortunately right back where we were before the confessions began."

"Are we?" queried Evelyn.

"Except that the ruby—the real ruby—is more unaccountably gone than ever. However, this is too glorious a morning to worry about that. By the way, I venture to say that your esteemed cousin and uncle will find their mail rather interesting this morning."

"How do you mean?" asked Evelyn.

"If it arrives during breakfast, watch their faces," said Poole. "They should both receive notes from that Burwick jeweler acknowledging that the rubies have been duly returned as unsuitable. I took them back myself."

"Why, Mr. Poole!" A mischievous gleam shone

in Evelyn's blue eyes. "What a dreadful surprise for them! I can see them blinking from the shock already. Just the same, it's a punishment they richly deserve, trying to deceive you—" Evelyn stopped short and crimsoned. "But I have been punished, too," she went on, hastily. "And I'll never try to deceive you again as long as I live. You can't imagine how perfectly miserable I've felt every moment of the time since I fibbed to you about the ruby."

"So that was how you were feeling when we motored to the bank yesterday—I wondered," put in Poole, wickedly.

Again the color leaped to Evelyn's face as she recalled that ride which was to have led to his undoing. But she yielded the point to him. "It's real mean of you to remind me of that. Naturally, I did think I was going to—to put one over on you, as Jack would say. It isn't nice of you to throw that up to me now; and if I hadn't determined not to quarrel with you any more, I would—"

"Would what?"

"I'd quarrel now!"

"Then I'm sorry," said Poole, briefly, "if that means you're not going to be your natural self any more."

Evelyn abruptly turned the canoe about.

"Hullo! What are you up to now?" asked Poole, perceiving that they were making for the boat-house.

"Just trying to keep my resolve," she answered, meekly, "not to quarrel with you."

"But we were getting along beautifully," protested Poole.

CHAPTER XX

THE breakfast-hour came and went before the morning mail arrived, and the family group had broken up and left the dining-room when the handful of letters were placed in Evelyn's hands for distribution. She ran them hastily over: chief among them was a square white envelope for Poole, addressed in a bold, unmistakable feminine hand. Evelyn could not help noticing that it was postmarked "Lenox, Mass.," and she recalled that a few days before a similar square white envelope with a similar superscription had been among his mail.

"I wonder who she is?" was Evelyn's thought, as she paused and eyed the letter hostilely. Then she slipped the envelope under the others and examined the next, but the thought, "Does he write as often to her?" had formed itself in her mind before she could check it. Next in the pile were a couple of tradesmen's statements, a letter for Mrs. Scoville, and then two envelopes, each bearing the letter-head of "T. Lambrick, Burwick, Mass.," addressed in a round, clerical hand, one to Colonel Geoffrey Winthrop, Esq., the other to Archibald H. Winthrop, Esq.

Evelyn, forgetting everything else, ran out to the porch. She shot a meaning look toward Poole, who was lounging on the veranda steps and chatting with

Colonel Winthrop, who stood over him. Archie, in the hammock, was engrossed in the morning paper.

"Here's a letter for you, Uncle Geoff," said Evelyn, tendering the letter to him, "and here's one just like it for Archie. They must be bills," she challenged, lightly.

"Haven't a debt in the world," protested Colonel Winthrop, adjusting his nose-glasses to examine the envelope. "Archie may have, but not I—" He paused as he read the name of T. Lambrick printed in the upper corner. Then, moving away from Poole, he seated himself in one of the wicker chairs, first glancing guardedly to see that Archie, lazily engaged in opening his own letter, was not watching him. Thus, safe from observation, Colonel Winthrop opened the folded paper and read:

COLONEL GEOFFREY WINTHROP, ESQ.

DEAR SIR,—I beg to acknowledge the receipt of the ruby which you purchased yesterday, and which Mr. Poole returned to-day at your request. I regret that you find the stone unsuited to your purpose, and have charged the same off your account. I am expecting an assortment of stones within the next week or so, when I trust I can satisfactorily meet your requirements.

Thanking you for your continued patronage, I remain

Yours truly,

T. Lambrick.

Colonel Winthrop slowly perused the letter twice while a faint tinge of red mounted to his cheeks. He gazed furtively at Poole, but the latter, with his back to one of the porch pillars, was apparently lost in a dreamy contemplation of the blue sky.

A low ejaculation of surprise from Archie caused

Colonel Winthrop to look round. Their eyes met blankly for a moment.

"What the devil!" muttered Archie. He sat up in the hammock, glanced toward Poole, and, finding himself unobserved, handed to Colonel Winthrop the letter he had just opened. "Read that," he said, in a low voice.

Colonel Winthrop squared his shoulders with a little military jerk, read the letter, and then cocked a speculative eye at Archie over the top of his glasses. "Read *that*," he retorted, briefly, and extended to Archie the letter addressed to himself, which, with the exception of the name, corresponded, word for word, with the other.

Archie looked up puzzled. As the truth began to dawn upon him a broad smile spread across his lips. "So you tried it, too?"

Both conspirators again cast covert glances at Poole. He had not changed his position, except that his glance was no longer at the sky, but upon Evelyn, who now, with her back turned to the other two men, stood over him endeavoring to restrain the mirth that threatened to convulse her.

Colonel Winthrop nudged Archie. "Don't let on," he whispered. "I think we had better go inside a moment and compare notes." The two men abruptly abandoned the veranda.

With their departure, Evelyn's head and then her shoulders bent lower, her whole body shaking with repressed laughter. Poole, looking up at her, at last deigned a slow smile.

"How *could* you keep your face so straight?" gasped Evelyn. "Did you ever see anybody so

completely taken aback? But you didn't see them."

"Oh yes, I did," Poole assured her. "Such psychological reactions are too interesting to miss."

"They've gone inside to lay their heads together."

"Let them," said Poole. "We shall hear more of it later. By the way, is there any letter for me?"

Evelyn's smile vanished. From the envelopes in her hand she snatched the one addressed to Poole and held it behind her back. "There is—one," she answered.

"Please, then"—he reached out his hand impatiently—"I'm dying to get it."

Evelyn's heart sank as she caught the eager look in his eyes. She had thought to tease him a little about the letter before yielding it up to him. She had even planned to remark the unmistakably feminine hand and the similarity of this letter to its predecessor of a few days before. But in the face of his frank eagerness her resolution changed in an instant. She dropped the letter abruptly into his hands and, turning about, went into the house, where she furiously told herself that it was no concern of hers, and then continued to think about it.

Poole picked the letter up, and as he glanced at the handwriting a look of vexed disappointment crossed his face. He carelessly tore the envelope open, muttering to himself, "Damn it! Why don't I hear something definite from Jacobson?"

With bored indifference he perused the six pages of Genevieve Yardley's tenderly effusive letter, and then dismissed both writer and missive by thrusting the latter ignominiously into his coat pocket.

"Why don't I hear from Jacobson?" he fretted to himself.

"I say, Poole."

He looked up to see Colonel Winthrop standing at the door, and Archie just behind him. Both wore rather sheepish smiles.

"Archie suggests that he and I invite you to name your drink."

By a later mail came the letter which Poole was impatiently awaiting. It bore a special-delivery stamp, which brought it to the house shortly after luncheon. Poole retired to the library, where with trembling hand he tore the envelope open and unfolded the single sheet of paper which bore at the top the embossed letter-head of a summer hotel in Windsor, Vermont. At last, he reflected, he was about to learn whether his daring theory had any foundation in fact. His expression revealed both satisfaction and disappointment while his eye raced across the closely written lines. Over one paragraph he paused and frowned; it contained the gist of the letter:

"I have succeeded in finding that Mr. Winthrop was here for three successive summers—four years ago, which is the year in question, and the two summers preceding. He is remembered at this hotel, and other members of the Winthrop family also came here for brief visits. I have found two persons in the village who recall him as a summer resident of the hotel, but nothing more. The summer colony constantly changes from year to year; the natives appear to take little interest in them, and

naturally can recollect little about them after so considerable an interval as four years. . . ."

Poole threw down his agent's letter and began nervously to pace the room. "Jacobson will miss the clue. It's there, somewhere, right before his eyes doubtless, and he'll miss it. Confound it! I've a great notion to—by Jove, I *will* run the thing down myself, and at once! This affair has hung fire too long." He paused at the library table and picked up a railroad time-table. "There's a train leaving Burwick at three-twelve—change at Norton Junction—Windsor at six-ten." He paused to reflect. "Hanged if I don't make a stab for it! It's now or never." He drew out his watch and studied its face. Then he went to his room, and ordered Kenji Kato to pack a suit-case for him. "I'll be back to-morrow night," he said briefly to his servant, who without betraying any surprise began at once to get together what Poole would need for the hurried trip. "I'm going to—" he began aloud, and then thought to himself, "Let me see, where shall I say I'm going? Lenox, will do, for an excuse." Then aloud to the Japanese man he went on, "I've got to run up to Lenox overnight and see Mr. Yardley. No, I sha'n't bother to dress there," he added, as Kenji questioningly held up his evening clothes.

In the hall a few minutes later he encountered Evelyn and explained his precipitate departure. "I'm awfully sorry. I'm off on the three-twelve from Burwick—"

Evelyn, knowing the principal stations of the up-trains and still mindful of the white square envelope

and its postmark, made an instinctive guess: "To Lenox?"

"Why, how did you guess?" exclaimed Poole, slightly puzzled. "I've got to straighten out a business matter with old Yardley who's been pestering me ever since my return from London, so if you will excuse my absence overnight, and this flying departure—"

"Oh, of course," said Evelyn, with a graciousness slightly tinged with coolness. "And if you can find a moment from your absorbing business with 'old Yardley,' won't you please remember me to Miss Yardley?"

"What, you know Genevieve?" queried Poole, again surprised.

"I knew her slightly at college," said Evelyn, stiffly.

"I had no idea you knew her," Poole went on.

"We don't correspond," said Evelyn, in subtly innocent tones.

Poole looked at her sharply, but her eyes met his blankly serene. "Hm-m, well," he said, and hesitated.

"If you're going to make the three-twelve, we can't waste time discussing Genevieve Yardley, or you'll miss dining with her this evening. I'll motor you over to Burwick."

"That's awfully good of you, Miss Winthrop," Poole protested, "but I've already asked Grimes if he can get some one to take me over."

"Then you'd rather not go with me?" asked Evelyn, flatly.

"I'd be delighted, but I don't want to put you to all that trouble just for me."

"I'm not doing it on your account at all," replied Evelyn. "I have got to go over to Burwick to see how my poor man is doing at the hospital, and you might just as well go along. So if you're ready—"

Poole assented. "I'm all packed. I'm ready to start now."

Kenji Kato appeared at the head of the stairs with Poole's suit-case. As they went out on the veranda Poole suddenly turned back. "There's a book in the library I want to take with me." He reappeared bearing a bound volume of *Comptes Rendus*.

"Where's Jack? Isn't any one around? I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to say good-by for me and make apologies to every one." He mounted into the car beside her, and they set off.

"That's a curious book you've chosen for a railway journey," said Evelyn, eying the formidable scientific volume at Poole's side.

Poole laughed, and patted the leather binding. "I have found it anything but dull lately."

The motor-car wound up the road leading to the Saddle-back, descended into the Burwick valley, and gradually approached the town. At the railroad-station Poole dismounted, gathered up his book and baggage, and held out his hand to Evelyn.

"Good-by—until to-morrow night."

Evelyn regarded him dubiously. "I hope Mr. Yardley will appreciate all the haste and trouble you are giving yourself on his account. Well, good-by," she continued, when Poole hesitated over his answer. "Remember me to Genevieve. I'm off to the hospital to see my man."

The machine glided away from Poole, who stood

silently watching its departure. As the car rounded a corner Evelyn turned and waved a nonchalant hand.

Poole sought the interior of the station, purchased a ticket to Windsor, Vermont, and in the interchange of words with the railroad agent discovered that the three-twelve train, which, according to schedule, was due in ten minutes, was in reality thirty minutes late. He consoled himself with a cigar, which he smoked while pacing the length of the station platform, but the minutes dragged. The thirty minutes promised to become forty-five. He was still pacing the platform when Evelyn, having made her visit to the hospital, came again into view on the way home. Catching sight of Poole, she hesitated, then turned the car toward the station.

"You've been waiting all this time!" she exclaimed.

"The beastly train is three-quarters of an hour late," explained Poole.

"What a pity!" rejoined Evelyn. "You could have gone along with me to the hospital and avoided this long wait."

"How did you find your patient after his smash-up?"

"Oh, he's doing fine. But it will be a dreadfully slow ordeal. Eight weeks at least—poor fellow!"

"I rather think he's a lucky dog to have fallen into your Good-Samaritan graces. I wouldn't mind putting up at the hospital myself under such conditions."

Evelyn dismissed the remark with a little shrug. "I guess Joe Spurling would trade places with you

quickly enough. . . . What ever is the matter with you?"

Poole's eyes had suddenly fixed upon her like small, sharp points.

"What did you say his name was?" demanded Poole.

"Joe Spurling. He's the son of a dreadful old man who lives up in the woods and won't do anything for him."

"Good Lord!" muttered Poole to himself. "And I've been turning half the state upside down trying to find him!"

His decision was instantly made. "I've got to see that chap," he announced, abruptly, and prepared to bolt.

"What? You're going to the hospital?" demanded the astounded girl in the car.

"Yes, this minute—"

"But you'll miss your train!"

"Don't care. Can't help it. I've got to see Spurling at once." He was almost beside himself with excitement. Abruptly he came back to the car. "Excuse these wild antics—this news has quite taken me off my feet. And don't breathe it to a soul—my bolting off this way."

"But what will Mr. Yardley say?"

"Oh, hang Yardley!" said Poole, and bolted.

Evelyn watched him turn the corner in mad, eager haste.

"What can have gotten into him?" She stared up the street where he had vanished, marveling at his sudden, erratic behavior. "He didn't even give me a chance to offer to motor him over. And he's gone off leaving his baggage and everything!"

Accepting the situation with a sigh, she recovered Poole's suit-case and book from a near-by bench, and then motored slowly back to the hospital.

"He certainly needs somebody to look after him—tearing off on such a wild-goose chase."

Then it was that the robbery of the safe recurred to her, and she vainly wondered what possible connection poor Joe Spurling could have with that.

CHAPTER XXI

POOLE tore down the street, for once quite beside himself with elation and excitement. Joe Spurling in the Burwick Hospital—and practically in Evelyn's care!—and for two weeks a detective agency, provided with a description of him, had been turning Boston and a dozen other towns upside down in the vain effort to get trace of him. A conviction which had been gradually growing upon Poole for several days now seemed certain: Spurling had never gone to Boston. In any case, he was now close at hand, and unable to escape again. As this comforting reflection deepened in Poole's mind he began to reflect upon the absurdity of his abrupt flight. Still the trip to Windsor might well wait for a day or so, and perhaps in the mean time Jacobson would run down the clue. His abandoning Evelyn, however, would call for some explanation and even apology. The apology could be made, but the explanation—well, the cat was not out of the bag, but decidedly showing its head. He must trust her not to tell of his mad dash to see Spurling. If he had in a way betrayed his hand by this sudden move, at least the knowledge of it would be only hers.

As he approached the hospital he dropped these speculations to consider the more immediately important matter at hand and to decide upon his mode

of meeting and dealing with Spurling, to whom he was unknown. He entered the building, and after some parley at the office he followed a white-capped attendant through the cool, clean corridors and into a bedroom where on a white, iron cot Joe Spurling lay. On a table at his elbow stood a bowl of big red peonies that to Poole wore a familiar air. He scanned the healthy, rugged features of the young man, who looked oddly out of place in these surroundings.

"My name's Poole—Montgomery Poole." He introduced himself briefly, calculating upon his next words to gain the audience he sought. "I'm a friend of Evelyn Winthrop's—in fact, I'm visiting at the Winthrops'—and I thought I would drop in for a moment. I hope you don't mind?"

Young Spurling's questioning gaze brightened at the mention of Evelyn's name. "Any friend of Miss Winthrop's is welcome here," he said, after a moment's deliberate survey of Poole. "She's been awfully kind to me. There's a chair—sit down."

Poole accepted the seat, while the injured man's eyes mutely followed each of his movements.

"It's the devil and all to be laid up this way," began the visitor.

"Then you've tried it?" queried Spurling, with just the flicker of a smile softening the drawn expression of his face.

Poole nodded. "I was thrown from a horse once —clean break of the left thigh-bone. Flat on my back for two months. Is that about what you're in for?"

"I reckon so. It's my right leg, though. Down

and out just as long, I suppose," said Spurling, disconsolately.

"Well, I'm sorry for you. It's tedious business, and no joke. Lucky Miss Winthrop happened along to pick you up—"

Spurling's eye kindled. "Hain't one girl in a thousand would 'a' done it—could 'a' done it," he broke out, with manifest feeling.

Poole studied the frank, rough face and honest eyes of the prostrate man. "If there's any burglar in his make-up I very much miss my guess," was his disappointed mental comment. Aloud he said, "Tell me about it," although he knew well the details of the adventure.

"I was takin' the road from Burwick over to the Saddle—you know the Saddle-back?" queried Spurling.

Poole nodded. "Yes, and I've even footed it once or twice. It's a steep climb at the finish."

"I hadn't gone that far—I was just outside Burwick near Cuyler's Creek—"

"You live here in Burwick?" asked Poole, casually.

Spurling shook his head. "I used to, but I've been away for a spell—up in Windsor, Vermont. I'd just landed in Burwick—by the noon train"—he went on, slowly, painstakingly, with each detail. His visitor's eyes had narrowed alertly upon him.

"Windsor—Windsor, Vermont?" repeated Poole, deliberately. "Haven't I heard of that place before?"

"Perhaps; it's quite a summer place—hotels and all that, you know."

"Oh, I remember," declared Poole, as if the

thought had recurred to him, "I've heard Archie Winthrop speak of it."

He was surprised to see the effect of his words. The face of the man before him hardened almost to a scowl. He picked moodily at the coverlet of the bed, and then shot a suspicious look at Poole.

"Archie Winthrop a pal of yours?" he demanded, bluntly.

"Hardly." Poole disclaimed the idea with a laugh and shrugged his shoulders. "Jack Winthrop I know pretty well, but I've only recently met his cousin." The other man seemed to catch the delicate intimation of the accent and gesture.

"Lucky for you," said Spurling, shortly.

"Why, what do you mean, Spurling?" asked Poole.

"Nothing," replied the other. "Say, he's only a second cousin of Miss Winthrop's, ain't he?"

"Not even that. He's a second cousin, I believe, of Miss Winthrop's father."

The man on the cot seemed pleased by Poole's answer. "I've known him a long time," said Spurling, "and yet never really knowed him—" his words broke short off. "But I was tellin' you—I was on that bridge over Cuyler's Creek when that blasted automobile come along." Spurling reverted abruptly to his story, and Poole was forced to lend an impatient ear. He picked up a dark crimson petal that had fallen from the bowl of peonies, and idly toyed with it while he listened to the man's labored but feeling tribute to Evelyn's pluck and resourcefulness.

"Trust her—even single-handed—to see you safely out of it," said Poole, when the other had

ended. "But I am sorry none of the rest of us were along to come to your help—Jack or Archie—"

Again Spurling's brow darkened at the mention of Archie's name. "I'd lie there forever 'fore I'd let *him* help me."

"Who? Archie? Oh, come, aren't you a bit rough on him? I don't know him well, but he strikes me as a straightforward, decent enough chap," interposed Poole.

"Mebbe he is—among his own class," conceded Spurling. There was a sullen fire in his eye.

"Look here, Mr. Spurling," Poole cut in, with frank directness. "What's your grudge against Archie Winthrop? He's never injured you."

"Hain't he, though?"

"Well, has he?" persisted Poole.

Spurling was silent. Presently he looked up from his moody survey of the bed-covers and regarded Poole with a frank, steady eye. "I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Poole, if you won't mind my speaking pretty free."

"Why, certainly, Mr. Spurling. I sha'n't mind."

"It's none of my business—" temporized Spurling.

"What of it? Fire away," Poole encouraged him.

"What I want to ask is—are you a—a particular friend of Miss Winthrop?"

The import of the word was instantly clear to Poole. It gave him pause, but he looked up squarely at Spurling. "Well—I want to be," he said, slowly. "Does that answer you?"

Spurling nodded. "I thought so. I wish you luck. And in that case I'm going to answer the

question you asked me just now." The man in bed hesitated, then began haltingly and with manifest diffidence to tell his story, the words at length pouring out in a flow of anger.

"You remember I said I was just back from Windsor when this blamed accident laid me out; well, I've made trips up there, off and on before, when work was slack. There's a girl lives in Windsor that —that I think a lot of—never mind her name. I used to go up there to see her. I used to write letters to her—understand? Between you and me, I was in love with her, and I don't mind saying she liked me. Six months ago I up and asked her to marry me, but she wouldn't say yes and she wouldn't say no. She always kept putting me off for one reason or another. Finally, less'n a week ago, I says to her outright, 'Sally, what you got agin me?' 'Nothing,' says she, short like. 'Don't you love me?' says I, and she says 'Yes.' 'Don't you love me enough to marry me?' says I, and she hesitates, almost crying. Then she blurts out, 'I'm afeard o' marrying you—I'm afeard o' marrying any man.'

"'What you feared o' me for?' I asks, plumb puzzled. 'Don't you believe I love you?' And with that she begins crying her eyes out. 'Men don't know their own hearts,' says she. 'They're sure to change. I don't dare trust any man. I just don't dare.'

"'Oh, shucks,' says I, 'somebody's been filling you with book yarns that never happened.'

"'Never happened,' says she, and she give a funny kind of a laugh; 'it happened to Alice.' You see, Alice Waters— Damn! I didn't mean to tell her name." Spurling broke off in vexation.

"Never mind," said Poole. "It's one name or another, and all the same to me."

"Well, you see, Alice was a sister of hern that had died two or three years before. I'd never seen her. It was before I got to know Sally. There was a picture of her hanging in the parlor. She was a mighty pretty girl if she was anything like that picture. She had light hair and blue eyes and a lively look about her—not at all like Sally, who's dark and sober-looking and quiet."

Poole sat rigid in his chair, following intently every syllable of Spurling's speech.

"'What happened to Alice?' I asks, and then she tells me everything. It seems that three or four years before, a young fellow, spending the summer at the hotel there in Windsor, got acquainted with Alice. She was pretty and attractive, and a girl men had an eye for. This chap went around with her a lot. He was good-looking and had nice city ways and lots of money, and he made out he thought a lot of her and completely turned her head. She might 'a' known he was just fooling with her to pass the time, that a fellow like him was not taking to a country girl like her for keeps, but she fell dead in love with him, and—well, come September he was ready to dig out, leaving her broken-hearted and worse. Then she went all to pieces, and the truth come out. There was an awful mess, but they managed somehow to keep it pretty quiet—the young chap himself, I guess, was glad to see to that. He didn't get away. Alice's brother cornered him and gave him his choice o' marrying her or a bullet through his head, and he married her on the spot.

But of course he skipped off afterward. They couldn't 'a' held him, and what was the use? He sent her money, but she didn't want that. And she didn't want him after she saw he was tired of her. She just took sick and pined away, and six months later she was dead. . . .

"'That's what men is,' says Sally, when she'd told me all that. And I begun to see how she really felt. She'd had to live it all alongside her sister Alice, all those months she was slowly dying, and I guess it would 'a' been a facer for 'most anybody.

"'But I'm not like that—d'ye think I'm like that?' says I, mad clean through that she should put me in a class with that sneak. . . .

"'No,' she says, crying and shaking, 'I know you ain't like that, but you can't understand how I feel after what I've been through. Alice made me promise I'd never look at any man—she just made me *dread* men. It's a foolish feeling, Joe,' says she, 'but it's got me. I can't shake it off. I never looked at any man before I met you, and even with you that feeling sometimes comes over me—oh, I can't tell you how I feel. I like you, but I can't marry you—I just can't. . . .'"

Spurling's head lowered, and he fixed Poole with his heavy glowing eyes. "That chap of Alice's was Mr. Archie Winthrop."

The climax of Spurling's recital brought no exclamation of surprise from Poole. While his mind was coldly fastening upon the facts now within his grasp his elation fell away. It had leaped up sharply in that first moment when he realized that here in the hospital at the bedside of this man he

was discovering, syllable by syllable, the very facts he had had the temerity to hypothecate and then to set a trusted, resourceful agent scurrying over three states to prove actualities.

And yet there were questions still to be raised, uncertainties to be made clear, before his subtly spun theory should have his own whole belief. If he had only been shrewdly guessing. . . . Poole realized the gravity of his position. A score of questions were pressing upon his lips as a soft-toned bell chimed the hour. The visiting period was over, and the white-capped nurse had reappeared at the doorway.

Poole picked up his hat, and, rising to his feet, held out his hand to Spurling. "Time works its changes. You'll get her yet," he said, cheerily.

"I sha'n't give her up," answered Spurling. The nurse approached, and Spurling broke off. Poole hurriedly put one question:

"And you learned all this within the last week? You had no suspicion of it before?"

"If I had, I'd never—" Spurling looked distrustfully at the nurse and then at Poole.

Instinctively Poole caught up again his first theory, now discarded, which had driven him so precipitately to the hospital.

"You said you knew Archie Winthrop?"

Spurling nodded. "I used to work on the Fenwick farm that belonged to the Winthrops. I've known him—slightly—a long time."

"And he knows you—well enough to call on you for an odd job in your line if it offered? You've worked as a machinist, haven't you, here in Burwick?"

Spurling assented, but with a curious look at Poole, from which the latter instantly took his cue.

"Mr. Spurling, you put a rather frank question to me a little while ago. I wonder if I might do the same?"

The other regarded him warily. "Well, what?" he answered, with evident reluctance.

"Why did you leave Wilton in such a hurry two weeks ago last Thursday?"

The question drew a puzzled smile from Spurling. "I was off to Windsor to see Sally."

"By the eight-o'clock train, which makes no connection at Norton Junction?" demanded Poole, sharply.

"But I didn't know that at the time," pleaded Spurling. "I had to wait at the Junction four hours."

"I see," went on his questioner, "and I wonder if you'd mind telling me where you were and what you did very late the night before?"

A dull color crept into Spurling's swarthy cheeks.

"Excuse me, but it's past the hour," put in the nurse in decisive tones, advancing toward them.

Poole leaned over the bed with a quick whispered question, then another, and another, to which Spurling answered in low tones. . . .

"Well, good-by for the present. I'll drop in on you again, if I may," said Poole. The nurse was beside them.

"Glad to have you—any time. You see, I knew who you were," Spurling called after him. "Miss Winthrop told me about you."

Poole wheeled in surprise. "Miss Winthrop told you! What did she tell you?"

"Nothing to your discredit," said Spurling, with a grin.

Poole shot a last wondering look at Spurling and took his departure, chafing over each step of the retreat that for the time being he was forced to make.

Coming down the steps of the entrance to the hospital, he found Evelyn awaiting him in the motor-car. On the seat beside her, guiltily confronting him, were his abandoned suit-case and the volume of *Comptes Rendus*. One glance at her face told him that explanations of some sort would be speedily in order. He had abruptly given over his trip to Windsor in order to see for himself the man whom he suspected of being a burglar. Instead, he had found a clean-cut young mechanic who had on his lips the very words Poole wanted most to hear. But for the moment these matters of supreme importance had to be relegated to the background while an abandoned suit-case and railroad journey were very much to the fore and badly in need of an explanation.

"If this hospital maintained a ward for demented persons, I certainly shouldn't have troubled to come back for you," was the tart greeting which Evelyn accorded him.

Poole surveyed the suit-case with a forlorn smile.

"Oh, I rescued your abandoned traps," went on Evelyn, noting the direction of his gaze. "Somebody had to look out for you. I perceived at once that you had become mentally and morally irresponsible, so I had no alternative but to follow you here—"

"That was awfully good of you," broke in Poole.

"Not at all. I was aghast at the thought of you in your frantic state running at large in this peaceful town. Are you sure you are once more quite yourself?"

"Perfectly, thank you," said Poole, meekly.

"Then perhaps you will tell me the cause of this—I don't know what to call it."

Poole let the question hang fire while he mounted into the machine, tumbling the suit-case out of the seat beside her. The car started forward.

"I'm listening," Evelyn prodded him, as they bowled along the elm-bordered street.

Poole ventured a counter-attack. "What was it you told Spurling about me?"

"Nothing compared to what I shall have to tell him next time."

"But you did tell him something," persisted Poole.

The girl slowed the car down almost to a halt and turned upon him. "You didn't give over an urgent railroad journey to Lenox and dash frantically across this town to discover merely that," she asserted, emphatically.

"The gentleman on that coal-cart just ahead is wondering whether you intend to blockade the middle of this street," rejoined Poole, calmly.

The car again shot forward, and as it coursed through the main street of the town Evelyn's attention was directed wholly to threading her way through the irregular traffic. As they approached the railroad-station the Junction train was just drawing out, carrying over to Wilton the few passengers who had changed from the down-state express a few

moments earlier. The machine halted, with throbbing cylinders, before the lowered crossing-gates while the yellow coaches of the train rumbled slowly past. One of the passengers at a window caught sight of Poole, and leaning out waved frantically at him. "I've got it! I've got it!" he yelled.

Poole, suddenly recognizing the man, jubilantly leaped to his feet, and, putting his hands to his lips so that his words might carry above the roar, shouted back, "I've got it, too!"

The train swept past, leaving Evelyn again staring wide-eyed at her seemingly demented companion. "You certainly have got it," she commented, severely, as Poole, quite unabashed at his abrupt action, resumed his seat again.

"That was Jacobson."

"And who, pray, is Jacobson?"

"Oh, a man I know," replied Poole, joyously. "By Jove, it's lucky I didn't take that train to Windsor. I would have missed him—I mean—" he stopped short.

Evelyn eyed him coldly. "You mean you had no intention at all of going to see Mr. Yardley in Lenox."

Poole abruptly gave up all attempt at evasion. "Correct," he acknowledged, blithely. He was too elated over the outcome of the afternoon's experiences to feel contrite over this venial sin in which he had been detected. And if Jacobson had been successful too. . . .

Evelyn meanwhile meditated upon his unequivocal and unblushing reply. At last she said severely, "A rather nice return you make—don't you think?—for my frankness with you this morning."

Whereupon Poole began to give the situation some sober consideration. "Why, you know," he began, lamely, "it's—it's rather difficult to explain—"

But she promptly cut him short:

"You needn't, Mr. Poole. You are in disgrace."

CHAPTER XXII

SHORTLY after dinner a dark, slim man dressed in an unobtrusive suit of blue serge presented his card to Grimes and inquired for Mr. Poole. He had driven over from Wilton in a carriage obtained from the local livery-stable. Poole speedily appeared, and the two men withdrew to the privacy of the library, where, with the door closed, they sat long in consultation.

Archie and Evelyn, sitting on the veranda while the soft August twilight slowly gathered, were talking together. In the living-room Colonel Winthrop was idly amusing himself at the card-table, playing solitaire while he vainly waited for the requisite number to make up the evening rubber.

"Where the deuce is Jack to-night?" demanded Archie of his cousin. Jack had not put in an appearance at the dinner-table, and was still absent.

"Grimes said he went to the village this afternoon, but I can't imagine what's keeping him so late as this," said Evelyn.

"I never knew Jack to be late for meals," observed Archie. "Something must be wrong indeed. And with Poole tied up with that chap in the library—Who is he anyhow?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn, faintly, yet she knew it could be none other than the Mr. Jacobson who had hailed Poole from the passing train that afternoon.

"He's staying a beastly long time, whoever he is," grumbled Archie, fretting at the absence of a fourth to make up the game. "I say, wouldn't Mrs. Scoville sit in for a few hands?"

"I don't think so. She was complaining of a headache and went to her room right after dinner. Besides, you know, she hates auction."

"Oh, well," drawled Archie, disappointedly. "Then let's play three-handed with Uncle Geoff," he proposed as a last resort.

"I don't want to," said Evelyn, absently. She was watching the last bit of color fade above the hills, but her thoughts were upon the secret conference in the library.

Who was this Mr. Jacobson? Where had he come from? And what was it he had "got" which Mr. Poole declared he had "got" too? And what was the meaning of the latter's abrupt dash to see that poor young man at the hospital? She was vainly trying to fit some answer to these questions, and wondering over the pell-mell events of the day. Chief among them, and provoking her high displeasure, was Poole's base and deliberate deception in telling her that he was going to Lenox when he had no intention of doing so. And he had unblushingly—almost jubilantly—admitted his guilt. During the ride home she had tried to snub him in a way that his conduct merited, but he had taken it very lightly. At the dinner-table she could see that he was still inwardly elated for some mysterious reason, quite careless of the fact that he had disgraced himself in her estimation. . . . And yet there was some small compensating satisfaction in the

thought that after all he had not intended to dash off helter-skelter to see Genevieve Yardley in Lenox. Perhaps she had been a bit foolish in attributing such a motive to him, but there were the two letters within a week which Genevieve, to her knowledge, had written him. And any girl who would write twice a week. . . .

"It's nothing to me," she reassured herself, with a little impatient tap of her foot. With fingers interlaced beneath her chin, she watched the lights beginning to twinkle in the valley.

"Why so pensive to-night?" asked Archie from the hammock beside her.

Evelyn gave a little lift to her eyebrows and vaguely shook her head.

Her cousin, lolling over on his side in order to view her the better, let his eyes dwell upon her in silent admiration. She was wearing a thin, soft dress of pale blue. Her hair, a cloud of dull gold, and her arms, propped upon her knees, gleamed softly in the dusk. On one wrist was the thin gold bracelet which Archie had given her the day before —a temporary compromise with his desire to bestow the diamond ring which she would not have. Reaching out his hand, Archie clasped the wrist that bore the bracelet and drew it gently toward him. Hardly conscious of the action, she yielded her hand to him. He held it in silence.

"When are you going to marry me?" he teased.

"Never," said Evelyn, softly, her eyes still upon the distant hills.

"That's encouraging," rejoined Archie. "And only three days ago you swore by all the gods that you would marry me."

"I didn't swear by all the gods," objected Evelyn.

"Not in so many words," he admitted, "but you did promise to marry me."

"If I did, I withdrew my promise the very next day."

"Then don't you think it's about time to renew it?" His fingers gently intertwined with hers as he held her hand clasped in his.

"I sha'n't renew it," said Evelyn, shortly. "Look here, Archie"—she turned toward him earnestly, dismissing her other thoughts—"why should any girl want to marry you?"

"Eh? Upon my word, that *is* a facer! Why," responded Archie, after a moment of amused reflection, "because I'm a perfectly proper, well-behaved young man, fairly presentable, and in no immediate danger of going to the poorhouse. Isn't that enough?"

"No, it's not enough."

"What more do you want? You've only to make known your wishes—"

"Archie, why don't you get down to life seriously? Why don't you do something?"

"Do something?"

"Yes—work."

"Now, that's a novel idea," said Archie. "I should never have thought of it myself."

"It's not a novel idea, and you surely must have thought of it many times if you have in you all that I think you have. You're capable of doing things, if you would only exert yourself. What girl can admire, can love a—a drone?"

"But if you won't marry me—whom have I to work for?" argued the man.

"If you would find yourself and your work, then you would soon find some nice girl to work for."

"But I *have* found the girl," said Archie, pressing the hand he held. "I've loved her for years. She's the one thing—the only thing—on earth I desire. Now if it's work—if it's a career that I'm lacking, I'll start gunning for one to-morrow."

"I'm very serious, Archie—"

"So am I, Evelyn." His earnest tone now matched her own. "I know I'm a loafer, but I don't mean always to go on loafing this way. I'll get out and do something some day that you'll be proud to share if you will only consent to share it."

Evelyn shook her head. "I can't do that, Archie."

"What? Take me on trust?"

"I mean, take you at all."

"I shall never give up my hope of you," declared Archie, ardently.

"Nor I my hope of you," replied Evelyn, smiling a little sadly upon him. "Be a man, Archie."

He held her hand a moment longer in silence, and then abruptly drew her toward him. "Thistles, I will!" he declared emphatically. "I'll make you love me yet."

There came a sharp, crunching sound upon the gravel of the driveway, and Jack mounted the steps of the veranda.

"Hullo!" he announced, in a rough, challenging voice, as he surveyed Archie and Evelyn in the shadows of the porch. "Cut that spooning a moment, and I'll give you a piece of my mind!"

"Jack!" protested Evelyn, astonished at the harshness of his tone.

"Well, I'm mad clean through," went on Jack. "Evie, I don't make head or tail of your game. Why don't you come out and fight in the open?"

"What *do* you mean?"

"Why have you been trying to make me out a thief when all the time you had that damned ruby yourself?"

Evelyn turned pale, and her hand trembled in Archie's grasp.

"Just put the soft pedal on that language of yours, young man," cautioned Archie.

"Oh, you shut up!" was Jack's surly rejoinder. "I happened into the bank this afternoon, and that oily-tongued jackass, Ogilvie, was all fidgets to know if you had recovered your lost ruby. I had the facts out of him in a jiffy. You had the ruby the very morning after it was stolen—and then you lost it somehow. But you made no bones about admitting that you had it that morning. Then why in hell—"

"Just modify that expression," said Archie, sharply, jumping up from the hammock.

"I suppose you're in the game, too," retorted Jack.

"I don't know what you are talking about," rejoined Archie, "but you're not going to talk to Evie in that way."

The two men faced each other angrily.

"Well, I've been accused by two people—not of taking the ruby, but of *stealing* it"—Jack threw the words out hotly—"and one, or both, of them had the ruby at the time, at least knew where it was. I call that downright slander, and I want an explanation inside of twenty-four hours or—I quit this house for good!"

"Jack!" cried Evelyn, warningly.

The library door had opened, and Poole and his visitor came out into the hall. The trio on the porch maintained a forced silence while Poole accompanied the stranger down the steps and after summoning the livery carriage from the rear bade him good night. The carriage drove rapidly off, and Poole, with hardly a glance at the group on the porch, returned to the library.

In the mean time the heat of Jack's rage had partially cooled, but he was still in an ugly mood. "Mind you, an explanation within twenty-four hours, or I clear out for keeps," he repeated, wrathfully, and stalked into the house.

"That young man needs a lesson in manners," said Archie, disgustedly, "and I've a great notion to give it to him."

"No, Archie, you mustn't quarrel with him," said Evelyn, tearfully. "Things are bad enough as they are."

"Well, I'm blowed if I understand what it's all about. What did he mean by his wild talk? Who's been accusing him of stealing? What's set him off this way?"

Evelyn, drying her eyes, related what had taken place between Colonel Winthrop and Jack and herself during the stormy scene in Jack's room in the bungalow. Archie emitted a low, prolonged whistle of astonishment as Evelyn went on to tell him how Jack had stealthily entered the library on the night of the burglary and had escaped by the window of her room.

"But that's only circumstantial evidence," ob-

jected Archie. "Didn't he say just now that you had the ruby—at the bank?"

"I did have it, Archie, and that is what Jack has just learned to-day. What he doesn't know, what I've kept from every one, is that I found the ruby on the morning after the burglary in the pocket of his coat."

Again Archie whistled in complete bewilderment. "Caught with the goods! Oh, I say, though, there's something wrong somewhere. He wouldn't brazen it out this way, would he?"

"I don't know what to think any more," exclaimed Evelyn, again on the verge of tears. "I wish the whole horrid affair had never happened. And it keeps getting worse and worse," she sobbed. "I can't believe that Jack would steal. And yet, if he didn't take the ruby, who did? Who would put it in his pocket, and why?"

Archie put a comforting arm around Evelyn and drew her down beside him in the hammock.

"Look here, little girl," he tried to soothe her, "can't we straighten this thing out peaceably with Jack? There's no sense in rowing over it."

"But he got so angry about it. You know how hasty he is when he does flare up. I thought he had forgiven uncle and me for asking him about the ruby. He hasn't shown any resentment since that day. Now I know it's been rankling in him all the time. I never thought that Mr. Ogilvie might tell him about the ruby. Don't you see how awful it makes me out to be—accusing him of taking it when I had it?"

Archie pondered the situation. "You've made a

big mistake in not telling him plainly that you found the ruby in his clothes."

"I couldn't do that," Evelyn shuddered against him. "It seemed the last straw—it seemed to prove that he took it. And all the time he had been denying flatly that he took it. Oh, Archie, what shall I do?" She turned despairingly to him.

"You leave it to me, Evie. I'll straighten it out with Jack, see if I don't."

"If you only could," said Evelyn, doubtfully. "But be very careful, Archie. Did you see that look in his eyes just now? He never looked like that before—never. He's—he's worked up enough to do something desperate."

"Trust that to me," counseled Archie. "Now go back and give me the details of the whole thing a little more clearly."

In the hammock, gently propelled back and forth by Evelyn's foot, the cousins sat for a long while, talking in low, earnest tones, Archie's arm tenderly around her, the dark and golden heads close together.

When Poole returned to the library, after Jacobson's departure, he shut the door behind him and stood for a while before the safe, a hard, determined light in his eyes, his lips close shut, his brow drawn in gloomy lines. With clenched hands he faced the ancient strong-box as if it were an old, inveterate foe that asked and gave no quarter. The hole beside the lock seemed to eye him in sinister, diabolical triumph.

To be so near and yet fall short of actual achieve-

ment, to have dared so bold, so incredible a hypothesis, formulated only after infinite care and labor, to have it at last substantiated at almost every turn, and yet—still to confront that one baffling gap where facts and theory failed to meet! If he could but bridge that gap! Here was success almost within his grasp, and yet just beyond it.

He sat down at the desk, with his head plunged in his hands, while his brain desperately attacked for the hundredth time the problem of how that one missing link might be forged and the chain welded into a perfect whole. What was there that human hand and human thought could do to effect that final junction?—without which the gap remained forever an immeasurable abyss—the facts portentous but impotent in his hands, his theory a flight of wild conjecture.

Spread out beneath his elbows lay one of the Winthrop diary volumes with its now familiar cryptic entries. He knew that he had exhausted the last resources from that volume. As his brain turned elsewhere, groping desperately for some new expedient, some new device that might make possible the last crowning stroke, his eye rested dully upon the closely written pages. He knew them all, word by word, line by line—they could help him no further. Wearily he turned a page or two, and came upon some loose pages of memoranda inserted between the leaves. These, too, had been searchingly examined; each fragment penned upon them had acquired the sickening familiarity of a copy-book exercise. The one now beneath his eye was a torn sheet of foolscap on which Mr. Winthrop had once started to set forth

some form of deposition. "I, Archibald Haverford Winthrop"—it was in the deceased man's small, careful handwriting—"do solemnly swear . . ." There it ended in a blot, and the sheet had been discarded.

For an hour Poole sat motionless, his head sunk in his hands, while he wrestled with the situation. Slowly despair began to settle upon him. He was at his wit's end; further it seemed humanly impossible to go.

At length with an exclamation of defeat he drew a cigar from his pocket and bit it nervously, only to find that the match-stand was empty. Impatiently he tore a shred from the piece of foolscap before him, and, holding it above the lamp until it caught flame, applied it to his cigar.

"I am—all—but—beaten," he told himself, despondently, while he watched the paper in his hand turn to a black charred mass as the flame crept slowly up it.

As he looked, the quadrillé structure of the paper came out peculiarly in the burnt sheet—a bizarre pattern of crisscross lines—and Poole started violently, his eyes narrowing upon the charred sheet.

"There it is! At last! In the ashes!" he exclaimed in a tense, excited whisper, leaning over to scan the burnt paper that trembled in his hands. He leaped to his feet in triumph.

"In the ashes! the ashes!" he repeated, almost beside himself with excitement. He snatched up the sheet of foolscap from which he had torn the fragment. His eyes devoured the brief written words, "I, Archibald Haverford Winthrop, do solemnly swear . . ." His glance roved impatiently about the

room as if seeking something; then, depositing the burnt paper carefully upon the table, he strode to the library door and opened it.

Jack was stumping through the hall, a sullen frown upon his face.

"I say, Jack, what was your father's name?" Poole abruptly demanded of him.

"Archibald H. Winthrop," replied the youth, looking wonderingly at Poole.

"I know that. But the middle name—was it Archibald Haverford?"

Jack shook his head. "No—Hastings. Haverford is Archie's name."

"Thanks," said Poole, and abruptly the library door again closed behind him.

He ran to the table and scanned again the quadrillé markings of the burnt paper.

"It was exactly like this! What a bungler I am! If I had only saved it! If there's a scrap yet that can be saved!"

He was instantly in action. Opening the library door, he looked out. The hall was deserted. He raced swiftly up the stairs to his room, snatched an electric flash-light from a drawer, and then returned softly down the stairs and along the corridor leading through the wing of the house. He paused at a bedroom door which stood ajar. Within, all was dark and silent. Then with a quick, resolute movement he entered, crossed the room, flashing a tiny white beam of light before him.

He bent down and examined the fireplace, which was fitted with an iron basket for burning coal. The flash of the search-light revealed it empty.

"Too late, of course!" groaned Poole. "It's been cleaned out days ago. If there was only a fragment!" he muttered, frantically darting his light into every nook and corner. Suddenly, in a niche formed by the rough plastering of the flue, he detected a small fleck of black. He seized it with eager trembling hands and examined it breathlessly. It bore distinctly the quaint quadrillé lines of the old-fashioned foolscap used by the late Mr. Winthrop. Poole's hand closed over it in a quiver of ecstasy, when suddenly his ear caught the snap of an electric switch button, and the room was flooded with light. Startled, he turned to find Archie Winthrop confronting him.

"What the devil are you doing here?" demanded Archie, with a faint sneering smile at the searchlight in Poole's hand.

Poole's lips tightened, and nettled at the other's tone, he turned upon him bluntly.

"I'll be damned if I don't tell you."

CHAPTER XXIII

"IT'S not a matter of six or eight words," said Poole coldly.

In response Archie carelessly shrugged his shoulders. He softly shut the door, and the two men faced each other.

"In this little affair of the safe which has occupied my attention during the last two weeks," began Poole, "my suspicions have not wholly overlooked the fact that you might very possibly have played a part in this interesting little mystery."

"So you come nosing into my room, eh? Well, I remember advising you to have a sharp eye on a young man resembling myself," said Archie, with a contemptuous laugh.

"My suspicions date much further back than that," retorted Poole.

"Indeed!"

"You may remember your testimony to the fact that on the night of the burglary you were awakened by a light flashed carelessly by some one passing outside this window of your bedroom?"

"I certainly do," said Archie.

"I should not have been likely to question the statement had it not been for an interesting little occurrence the following afternoon while tea was being served on the lawn. If I remember correctly

you expostulated with Miss Winthrop in regard to the arrangement of the pillows in the hammock. It seems you find it impossible to lie on your right side. I have taken the trouble since then to learn that this is quite true; that you habitually sleep on your left side. Perhaps you will tell me, then, how, when lying on your left side, a light from the window over there could ever have flashed across your eyes and wakened you. Obviously your back must have been turned to it."

Archie uttered a light, sneering laugh. "You have made a wonderful deduction. Clearly I am guilty of everything that follows from such a premise. Your case is complete, and nothing remains but to put on the handcuffs."

"Not at all," said Poole, coolly ignoring the sarcasm. "I mention this little incident merely because it suggested to me that your real part in the affair might be worth looking into closely, since it deviated in at least one detail wholly from your voluntary statement."

"So you think I rifled the safe and took Evelyn's ruby," retorted Archie.

"I think you were *interested* in the rifling of the safe," corrected Poole.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Archie. "And I warn you to be a little careful with your accusations," he continued, meaningly.

"Then let us dismiss accusations and theorize a little instead." Poole seated himself on the arm of a morris-chair, while Archie waited for his next words, an amused, sarcastic smile upon his lips.

"The evidence clearly points to this," resumed

Poole, "that the safe was opened by some one entering the house from the outside, and the clean-cut nature of the job shows the work of a man trained to the use of such tools. No one in the house was capable of it. Now, burglary is rare in this vicinity; certainly the drilling of a safe practically known to contain nothing of value, when silverware and a host of valuable articles lay around for the mere taking, seems a stupid performance for a burglar. The inference naturally suggested itself, then, that the safe was opened by an agent working from the outside, for the definite purpose of giving the color of burglary to the deed when no such burglary was intended—in other words, that it was done by connivance with, or at the request of, some one *inside* the house who could not otherwise get access to the safe. Do I make myself clear?"

"Theories have a way of being vague," said Archie, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I dare say yours are no worse than most pipe-dreams of their class."

"Very good," said Poole, unperturbed. "Let us go a step further. Miss Winthrop alone knew the combination of the safe. There remain Colonel Winthrop, Jack, the servants, and yourself, who cannot open it. Let us dismiss the others for a moment and consider yourself, since our attention has already been drawn to you, as I have pointed out. You have been visiting in this house some five or six weeks previous to the burglary. According to our theory, we must presume that you are anxious to get access to the safe. During these five or six weeks apparently no opportunity offers, for the safe is always kept locked, and the somewhat

desperate alternative of breaking into it alone remains. To employ an outsider for the purpose is a daring but ingenious thought. It gives the appearance of ordinary burglary to the undertaking, masking your own depredation upon the safe afterward. A quite natural aversion to such extreme measures, however, might easily lead you to postpone the attempt in the hope that some occasion might yet arise when the safe by chance should be left unlocked. Immediately upon Jack's return home, however, the deed is done, and it seems a fair assumption that Jack's return necessitated that the affair be carried out without a moment's further delay. The question arises, then, what was there in the safe which must not fall into the hands of Jack?"

"Twenty dollars and a ruby!" cut in Archie, with his sneering laugh. "This is absurd on the face of it. What the devil would I want with twenty dollars and a trumpery little jewel?"

"Precisely," agreed Poole. "The only answer is that you did not want twenty dollars and the ruby, but something else—"

"But there was nothing else in the safe," interrupted Archie, in exasperation.

"There were papers in the safe."

"Yes, some old junk, receipts, and so on, I believe—untouched for years."

"Pardon me, but they had been touched. On the morning of the discovery of the theft I noticed that the dust along the bottom ledge had been very recently disturbed in a way which indicated that the papers just above the ledge had been drawn out."

Archie, growing restive under Poole's slow, persistent advance, now flung out at him challengingly:

"Damn it all! What are you driving at? I'm blessed if I know or can even guess. If you've any accusation to make, come out with it squarely, and I'll make hash of it. I'm getting tired of this nonsense—old papers in a safe!" he ended, disgustedly.

"It seems far-fetched, doesn't it?" replied Poole. "I admit it quite puzzled me for a time to conjecture of what possible use to you any of those papers could be, that you should go to such extraordinary lengths to get them."

"That is about the first glimmer of reason you've shown," sneered Archie, "in this rigmarole of mere guesswork."

"What earthly interest could you have in the old papers in that safe?" Poole repeated the question as if to himself. "You'll excuse me if I become somewhat personal, Mr. Winthrop, in answering that question. You are a man of independent fortune—of considerable wealth, I believe. You have or can command everything that you desire. There is just one thing"—and Poole leaned forward, tapping his finger on the chair with each slow, incisive word—"you desire just one thing that you do not as yet possess, and that is—Miss Evelyn Winthrop."

"That will do!" Archie was on his feet, angrily facing Poole. "I forbid you to bring Miss Winthrop's name into this conversation!"

Poole from the arm of the morris-chair regarded him unmoved. "I mean no disrespect to Miss Winthrop. When I say that the one thing in the world you desire is Miss Winthrop for your wife

I state a fact that is obvious to every one around you and which, if anything, does you credit."

"My relations with Miss Winthrop are my own affair," retorted Archie, hotly, "and they shall not be discussed here!"

"I have no desire to discuss them. I yield to no man in my respect for Miss Winthrop, but her name must and shall be mentioned at this juncture. I repeat, the one thing in the world you desire above all else is Miss Winthrop for your wife, and my assumption is that if the paper you have obtained from the safe by such desperate means had fallen into the hands of the person for whom it was intended—presumably Jack—it would have thwarted your desire. My words are clear and to the point, and I stand ready to back them up!"

Archie's face grew livid under the sting of Poole's words. He advanced threateningly, with a menacing gesture in the face of his assailant. "This is all sheer guesswork! And what is more, your assumptions are an insult both to Miss Winthrop and to me, and I refuse to listen to them further!"

"As you like," replied Poole, coolly. "You demanded just now what I was doing here in your bedroom, and I am endeavoring to explain."

"You have explained nothing! You have aired a crack-brained, ridiculous theory, conjured up to fit a situation that is evidently too much for you."

"I am sure I'm not asking you to listen to it," said Poole, rising. "I can very well refrain from inflicting more of this recital upon you," and he started toward the door.

"Stop!" called Archie, quickly, and Poole paused.

"This thing is too serious to be dropped in such a way."

"I agree with you," said Poole, and he quietly returned to his chair. For a moment the two men silently faced each other, like combatants awaiting the signal to resume.

"You had me stealing old papers from the safe," at length said Archie.

"Only one paper," corrected Poole; and then he hazarded a telling stroke: "You burned it over there in the fireplace, which is unfortunate, as there was probably no witness to the paper but yourself, since the man who penned it for you to sign has long been dead."

In spite of his effort to show no recoil at Poole's astounding words, Archie paled. He held himself in superb control while he replied in withering, sarcastic tones, "But you are too resourceful not to be able to reconstruct a written paper which nobody ever saw."

"I think I may venture a shrewd guess at it."

Poole, however, abruptly swung into a new line of attack. "But first we must go back to a chapter of your life which opens and closes in Windsor, Vermont."

The words brought Archie to his feet with a sharp, inarticulate reply. He faced Poole with blazing eyes, his whole body trembling.

"Perhaps we need not review that chapter—the circumstances attending upon the marriage and death of Alice Waters," suggested Poole, eying his man keenly.

Archie turned and dropped weakly upon the edge

of the bed. "You need not," he said, hoarsely. He was completely undone. Poole's deliberate, persistent advances had been slowly undermining the cynical bravado of his defense. With this last assault the whole structure fell.

"Then we pass over this unfortunate chapter out of your history, admirably guarded from those around you, but nevertheless known at least to Miss Winthrop's father before his death. From certain memoranda which he left I have reason to believe that his feelings toward you altered greatly, although you were still received into this house as if it were your home. Your secret was kept, but certainly the earlier hope cherished by Mr. Winthrop that you, his godson, should marry his daughter was forever dismissed. With the death of your wife, however, your position was once more radically altered. The obstacle to your eventual marriage within the family was removed. Only Mr. Winthrop's secret, irrevocable opposition to such a union remained, and this, out of consideration for you, he could not reveal. But shortly before his death, while his son was in India and no one was at hand to whom he could intrust your secret, fearing what you might attempt after he was gone, he exacted a solemn promise from you, and penned with his own hand the oath which you signed: 'I, Archibald Haverford Winthrop, do solemnly swear—'"

"Stop!" Archie, who had sat as if fascinated by Poole's recital, could endure it no longer as the very words of his oath began to fall from Poole's lips. "Only the devil himself could have told you that!"

"You acknowledge it, then—all that I have said?" Poole demanded, quickly.

The bowed head of the other man feebly nodded as he sat overwhelmed.

"It was a scrap of this burnt document still clinging to the side of your fireplace that I was just now recovering. That is all."

For a few moments a deep silence filled the room, while Archie sat with his head between his hands. At length he raised a haggard and stricken countenance. "Well," he queried, thickly, his whole confident bearing gone, "now what? This exposure of me will be a great feather in your cap," he ended, bitterly.

Poole rose and strode to the fireplace, and, leaning an elbow upon the mantel, he frowningly studied the hearth. "I wonder," he said, darkly.

"You wonder?" the other echoed, dully. "You'll be rated a second Lecoq around here when you've shown me up."

"Look here, Winthrop," cut in Poole, abruptly, turning a pale, stern face toward the man on the bed. "We've reached a point where I must tell you something. You're in love with Miss Winthrop—" He eyed his listener steadily for a moment, and then added, "So am I."

"Well?" demanded Archie, hollowly. "You've got me disposed of."

"Damn it, man!" retorted Poole, almost fiercely. "I'm not the judge of your past. I didn't go raking it up for the purpose of furthering my own private ends. When I went into this thing I had no idea that I would fetch up where I have. I was bent

on solving a problem, and now that I've got the answer—I can't announce it without completely smashing you. So long as we love the same woman I can't do that. I'll meet you squarely in clean rivalry for place in Miss Winthrop's affections, but I'll be damned if I can bring myself to sandbag you this way at the start and then run a lone race by myself!"

Archie moodily studied the floor while Poole's words came sharp and fast. A little flicker of hope, unnoted by the speaker, lifted in the other's downcast eyes. "The race was already over," he muttered, despondently. "I had won it myself."

"The race was over!" Poole wheeled about and stared at the man on the bed. "What do you mean?"

"Miss Winthrop had promised to marry me," continued Archie, in the same dull voice.

"Had promised—to—marry you?" Poole repeated, aghast.

Archie raised his head, and his eyes squarely met those of Poole, now turned upon him in stunned surprise. "Precisely that. I give you my word, Poole, Miss Winthrop promised to marry me less than a week ago."

"Less than a week ago!" Poole's mind went staggering back over the days, recalling the hours he had spent with Evelyn, confusedly trying to repicture them in the light of this altered understanding of the situation. "Then you—you're engaged to Miss Winthrop?" he ended, weakly, as if unable to take the fact into his mind.

"I am," said Archie.

Poole paced the length of the room and turned. He lifted a pale, unflinching face toward Archie, and, forcing a faint smile to his lips, he said, as he extended his hand, "In that case I congratulate you. I—I have nothing more to say."

Archie made as if he did not see the proffered hand. He sat bent forward, his elbows on his knees, moodily studying the floor. "But you have a lot more to say—that's the deuce of it," he answered, gloomily.

"If you and Miss Winthrop are engaged, I have nothing more to say," reiterated Poole, quietly.

"What?" Archie looked up incredulously. "You'd —you'd hush up all this damnable mess I once made for myself—you'd keep quiet about that?"

Poole threw out his hands with a despairing gesture. "It's no longer a question of solving a mystery. If Miss Winthrop loves you, that settles it. If I laid bare the truth of this affair I would only be cruelly wrecking the faith in you of a good and true woman."

"That's damn generous of you, Poole," said Archie, staggering to his feet and leveling grateful eyes at the man before him. "That's damn generous of you," he repeated, with a husky tremor. "I don't care about myself—but I do for her. If she should know—it would be like wrecking everything in her world; it would blast all happiness out of her life forever. But you've—you've got to say something?"

Poole had moved toward the door during Archie's fulsome display of gratitude, but he turned impatiently at this final imploring question. "What do you mean?" he asked, curtly.

"Why, this affair of the safe. You've got to offer some explanation."

Poole gave a short, bitter laugh. "Well, then—a man can always lie for a woman, can't he?" The door closed behind him with a sharp jar.

In the corridor he almost stumbled over Kenji Kato.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Excuse. I have hunt you everywhere—"

"What for?"

"Master make journey again to-morrow? I have traveling-bag packed?"

Poole surveyed him a moment irritably. "What is he eavesdropping around here for? Confound him!" he said to himself. Then aloud he exclaimed, "Yes, pack bag, trunks, everything!"

The stolid yellow face for an instant showed surprise. "Trunks—everything?" he repeated.

"Yes, we are leaving to-morrow," replied Poole, shortly.

Kenji Kato nodded submissively and fell into step behind his master as the latter proceeded forthright to his room. Here the Japanese lingered over some small duties until Poole sharply ordered him to bring a whisky-and-soda, and then to clear out for the night.

At length, alone, he flung himself wearily down in a chair beside the open window and gave himself over to his dispiriting thoughts. From without came the plaintive incessant call of insects out of the soft night. The house itself was silent, except for the soft tread of Grimes, who was making his last round of the lower floor, extinguishing lights and

gently closing the windows. Overhead gleamed a clear sky of stars. Poole, looking out, discerned a single light still shining in the bungalow where Jack was quartered.

". . . So this is success," he mused, dejectedly. He drew his hand slowly across his forehead and sighed. His face looked strangely old and worn in the shadows. As he lay back in the chair, relaxed in mind and body, he experienced a sudden release from long-endured tension, the ending of a strain of which he had not been conscious until now. . . .

"And all the time I've been as blind as a bat," he scored himself, "blind because I refused to see." He began recalling the passages between Archie and Evelyn from day to day—the smiles and glances, the fragments of conversation, which he had chosen to ignore but which now rose before him in new significance. He smiled mirthlessly as he faced the outcome of his labors, now that the last cap-stone of his achievement was in place. He made ineffectual efforts to thrust it all from his thoughts, but as he looked dejectedly out upon the stars they dimmed repeatedly before his vision and there rose before him the beautiful face of a girl with eyes that regarded him with mischievous light and laughter. . . .

"I say, Poole," a voice cautiously assailed him from the ground. "Can I come up a moment and interrupt the star-gazing?"

Poole, looking down, descried Jack on the lawn below. "Of course. Come along," he answered, rather glad of this incursion upon his solitude. Jack disappeared; and a few moments later, quietly mounting the stairs, he entered Poole's room.

"I'm sixteen kinds of a damn fool," he said, abruptly, dropping into a chair and staring glumly at Poole's half-emptied glass.

"So am I," said Poole. "Sorry it's so late. I can't offer you anything, or we'd drink to each other's imbecility."

Jack negligently shook his head. "I've made an ass of myself again. You know how I blew up once before when Evie and Uncle Geoff put this ruby business up to me, and how you counseled me to keep quiet? Well, this afternoon I struck a queer thing that I don't make head or tail of, and which made me mad all over. I went off and got a beastly dinner at the hotel, and then came home ready to smash things. First thing I encountered was Archie and Evie —spooning on the front porch—and I let them have it."

Poole's eyes slowly closed as if in sudden pain.

"I'm a damned fool," went on Jack. "I was so mad I swore I'd have satisfaction or clear out of the house. If they call my bluff I don't see but what I've got to pack up and beat it." He looked at Poole with a wry, disgusted smile.

"What set you going this time?" asked Poole.

"That confounded ruby. It's Evie that has had it all the time—at the bank. Ogilvie told me. Damn it all! I wish you could get the whole blooming thing straightened out, and restore peace around this joint to all concerned."

Poole pondered the words for a moment, and turned with a slow, sad smile to the troubled youth.

"To-morrow, Jack, I promise to straighten everything out, and, as you say, restore peace in this house—to all concerned."

CHAPTER XXIV

INTELLIGENCE of two facts had somehow spread itself abroad and had preceded Poole's appearance at the breakfast-table the next morning—namely, that he was about to bring his visit to an abrupt close, and that the mystery of the rifled safe was at last to be revealed. Varying expressions on the faces of those about the table greeted Poole as he took his seat. Colonel Winthrop's eyes were snapping with interest, and he fidgeted over his breakfast with little appetite; Archie, avoiding Poole's gaze, attempted to share in the conversation with a jocularity which betrayed him ill at ease; Jack, for once quiet and morose, ate in stolid silence; Evelyn, doubtful and vaguely disturbed, ventured little outbursts of nervous gaiety.

"So it's all to come out to-day?" queried Archie, at length, and he allowed his eyes to rest in mute anxiety upon Poole.

"And you will all be pleased with the result, I promise you," answered Poole.

"But if the job's done that's no reason for packing yourself off in such short order," put in Colonel Winthrop, protestingly. Evelyn's blue eyes lifted to Poole as if seconding the appeal.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to break away," said Poole, looking down at his plate. "I should like

nothing better than to spend another week or two with you all—and no mysteries to bother with."

Evelyn was silent; but after breakfast, intercepting Poole alone in the hall, she accosted him. "Must you really go to-day?"

Poole's eyes, meeting hers for a moment and then turning away, fell upon her hands. His gaze was arrested—almost startlingly—by a gleaming solitaire diamond which she was now wearing on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"I must really—to-day," he answered, with decision, his eyes fixed as in a trance upon the ring.

With a quick movement the hand which bore the ring lifted to her hair and then fell again to her side. The diamond flashed full upon him.

"And is it to Lenox this time—for certain?" she rallied him.

Poole recovered himself. "After all," the thought came to him, "it's a kindness she means by declaring herself in this way."

"You see, I've almost forgiven you already for tricking me so outrageously yesterday," she persisted, gaily. "And if you could endure us all for just one day longer we'd be able to part good friends."

"I'm sure we shall part good friends," said Poole, and his slow smile masked the effort which the words cost him. "By the way," he abruptly changed the subject, "would you mind getting that packet of diamonds from the bank this morning? As an important exhibit in this affair they ought to be in evidence."

Evelyn's hand again rose to her lips as she meditated her reply. The diamond seemed to blaze inso-

lently before Poole's eyes. "Very well," she answered, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll go and get them." There was a look of regret in her face as she moved away. Poole, returning up-stairs to his room, carried with him the vision of the lifted hand and the solitaire stone which adorned it.

"Archie surely couldn't have told her," he tried to reassure himself. "But he has evidently asked her to display the ring. If I thought she was trying to let me down easily—" He left the intolerable thought unfinished. Coming upon Kenji Kato, busy in the midst of trunks and suit-cases, Poole vented his pent-up feelings in finding fault with the packing.

"Honorable master in bad humor this morning," the Japanese observed philosophically to himself, as he serenely proceeded with the work in his own way.

An hour later Poole, again descending the stairs, found Evelyn in the library with Archie, who had accompanied her to the bank. She greeted Poole with a smile and held up the sealed package. "You see how prompt and obedient I've been."

He took the packet, and with a glance at the intact seals flung it down upon the table by the window, where the morning sunshine poured a golden radiance into the room.

"And now for the safe," said Poole. "If you'll call the others—"

"What—now?" exclaimed Evelyn. She dashed from the room to summon Colonel Winthrop and Jack.

In the interval Archie regarded Poole uneasily. "What are you going to do, Poole?" he asked, anxiously.

Poole, pacing the room, replied without deigning a look at his questioner. "Mildly perjure myself by way of a little valedictory. You needn't worry," he added.

A moment later Evelyn, with Jack and Colonel Winthrop following, entered the room. Poole smiled slowly as he looked round the circle of eager, bewildered faces.

"You might break the seals and open that packet of diamonds," he said to Evelyn. "This is really 'Exhibit A,' so to speak." Evelyn tore off the heavy outer cover, disclosing the tissue-paper wrapping around the stones. Poole took the package from her. "Thank you, and won't you all sit down?" He deposited the packet of diamonds again upon the table and faced his auditors with a smile.

"The mystery of the stolen ruby is in reality very simple. The fact is that the ruby has never been stolen at all."

"But who took it?" demanded Colonel Winthrop.

"Nobody," said Poole.

A murmur of bewilderment went round the circle.

"I admit," went on Poole, "that it disappeared from the safe. I may say now that it next appeared in the pocket of Jack's coat in the bungalow, where Miss Winthrop found it and secretly took it to the bank for safe keeping. There it again disappeared while under lock and key in the bank vaults. Nevertheless, I repeat, the ruby has not been stolen or abstracted by any one, and if my theory is correct it is at the present moment reposing peacefully on the table before you in the unopened packet of diamonds."

"But Mr. Poole, I don't understand! The packet

contains only the diamonds, and they have been under seal," interposed Evelyn.

"And yet, if my theory is correct, the ruby is there," rejoined Poole.

"Well, that beats me!" stated Colonel Winthrop.

"It is really very simple," went on Poole. He drew from his pocket Evelyn's jewel-case. "It was in this box that Miss Winthrop placed the ruby and the diamonds on the night of our arrival. The next morning, on examining the jewels *in the box*, the ruby is missing. They are turned over to Jack to deposit in the bank. He thrusts the box into his pocket, and later, discarding his coat, the jewels tumble out, and now *out of the box* the ruby appears and is found by Miss Winthrop. The stones are taken to the bank, and upon a later visit, when the jewels are once more *in the box*, the ruby is missing. The stones are now again *out of the box* on the table here, and therefore the ruby should be among them. In short, the ruby has never been seen *inside the box* —that is the crux of the whole matter."

"What sort of a magic box is it, then," demanded Colonel Winthrop, "that a ruby will vanish when put inside of it?"

"Oh, there's no trick or magic about the box," laughed Poole. "It's a plain metal receptacle—quite innocent, I assure you. The missing ruby, however, if it were alive, could not have proved more elusive and deceptive. The fact is, one might say, it is not a ruby at all. At least, I should prefer to call it a white sapphire."

"A white sapphire! Why, it was as red as blood," objected Jack.

"Nevertheless—well, let me tell you something first," said Poole. His eye lifted to the shelves of books across the room. "One of the many pleasant memories I shall carry away from here is that of the odd hours I spent reading in that collection of Eastern legends which Jack's father brought together. One of them will be of interest to you. Many years ago—centuries, in fact—the Hindus had for the white sapphire a picturesque and poetic name: they termed it *a ripening ruby*, and the belief long current among them was that a white sapphire, if left undisturbed in its native rock for a sufficient length of time, would grow or ripen into a blood-red ruby. A rather pretty conceit, is it not? Of course, the Western—the civilized—world lightly dismissed this story with an indulgent smile; but within recent times science has come to find the germ of truth that so often underlies the fable of the East. With our awakening to a knowledge of radioactivity and its multiform presence almost everywhere in the earth has come new knowledge of that peculiar stone termed the sapphire. It is chemically a combination of aluminum and oxygen, and is known to mineralogists as corundum. It varies greatly in color. When blue we commonly term it a sapphire; when red, a ruby; when yellow, an oriental topaz. The sapphire is found in a multitude of shades and coloring, and recent experiments have proved that it is extremely susceptible, and will change its color, under radioactive influence.

"Now, granting that powerful radioactive influences may be present in the native rock where sapphires are found, we must pay some respect to

the Hindu tale of 'the ripening ruby.' Our laboratories are to-day demonstrating that such color-changes are possible in these precious stones. Intense heat, powerful light, x-rays, ultra-violet rays —I needn't bore you with the scientific details; you will find some interesting discussion of the subject in those bound volumes of *Comptes Rendus* on the shelves yonder. I come back at once to the stone we are particularly interested in and assert that its peculiar color-changes have been due to the odd coincidences of repeated radioactive influence brought to bear upon it by the box in which it was placed.

"To go back to the beginning, the stone when Colonel Winthrop brought it here was to all intents a ruby—literally, a red sapphire, which all rubies are —or, as I prefer to call it, a white sapphire which in its native habitat in Ceylon or Burma was generations ago turned by some natural process in the rock to an unstable red color. So it remained. Placed in the box among the diamonds, it is abruptly subjected to a powerful radioactive influence which during the night causes it to lose its unstable color and revert to white. In the morning, therefore, it is indistinguishable from the diamonds, and, Miss Winthrop looking into the box, naturally infers that it has been taken."

"But then there would be one more diamond," interrupted Jack.

"Precisely, and if Colonel Winthrop's memory as to the exact number of the stones had not gone back on him we might have detected the mystery at the start. Colonel Winthrop's recollection was that

there were fifteen diamonds, when in reality there were fifteen stones, including the ruby. There were only fourteen diamonds, but when we looked for fifteen diamonds, according to the Colonel's mistaken figure, we found all the diamonds there because the white sapphire — cut in the same shape — passed among them under its false color as a diamond.

"The box of stones is then given over to Jack. He puts it in the pocket of his coat which half an hour later he carelessly throws off to go out and play tennis. Now, observe, the case half tumbles from the pocket, and the stones are spilled out. The coat, has been flung down on a table by the bungalow window, where the strong morning sunlight falls full upon it. The white sapphire, escaping from the influence of the box, is now subject to the ultra-violet rays of the sunshine, whereupon the radioactivity of the box is counteracted and the white stone speedily assumes its red color again. Miss Winthrop, coming in, is surprised to see the stones carelessly tumbled out, surely overlooks the white sapphire, which is now again red in color, and is perhaps concealed or pushed under some fold of the cloth, but in shaking the coat it falls to the floor, and she discovers—the ruby.

"Guarding her discovery, which seems to mark Jack as the purloiner of the stone, she puts the white sapphire with the diamonds again in the box and deposits the box in the bank vault. Again the secret but powerful radioactivity of the box sets to work upon the stone—"

"But I say, Poole," interrupted Colonel Winthrop, who had been critically inspecting the jewel-

case. "What makes you think this box is radio-active?"

"I'll come to that presently," rejoined Poole. "For two weeks the stone is in the box, and, naturally, when Miss Winthrop takes me to the bank to show me the ruby, the sapphire is again white and indistinguishable from the diamonds. Apparently, the impossible has happened—the ruby has again been stolen.

"It was at this point that I took the box under examination," went on Poole. "The diamonds—and if my theory is correct, the white sapphire among them—were left in a sealed package at the bank. While we have been talking I have purposely allowed them to lie, wrapped only in the thin tissue-paper, here in the full sunlight. The white sapphire, therefore—if it has not already changed after being out of the box for three days—should have assumed its ruby coloring again. In short, if Miss Winthrop will now unfold the paper, and if my theory is correct, the ruby will be reposing among the diamonds as if nothing had ever happened."

Poole had hardly ended when Evelyn turned with an exclamation of delight, displaying the unfolded tissue. "And it's here! It really is!" To the others who pressed about her she exhibited the fourteen diamonds and in their midst the single red stone.

Jack accorded the truant jewel a wild whoop of welcome, and above the general outburst of surprise and questions showered upon Poole, Colonel Winthrop's voice raised itself.

"But this box, Poole—granting your theory is correct, and I've no doubt it is, for here the ruby is

once more—wouldn't it require an unusually powerful radioactive influence to work this color-change?"

"It undoubtedly would," agreed Poole.

"Whatever minute amount of radium might be contained in the metal of this box would be infinitesimal, wouldn't it?" persisted Colonel Winthrop.

"It would," said Poole, taking the box from him.

"Well, then, what becomes of your theory?"

"The explanation is that we have here a case, not of direct radioactivity, but of induced radioactivity. This box must once have been used for a considerable length of time as a receptacle for, say, some tubes of highly powerful radium salts from which the radioactivity of the box has been induced to this extraordinary degree."

"But you merely hazard that?"

Poole smiled and shook his head. "In the laboratory in the bungalow I have tested the box to my own satisfaction. The origin of its radioactivity would have been a puzzle, indeed, had it not been for a hint dropped by Miss Winthrop. She tells me that she found the box discarded in the laboratory and asked her father if she might have it for a jewel-box, and that he gave it to her with the laughing remark that it had held 'greater treasure than she would ever put into it'! From that remark, I think we may safely infer that some powerful radium salts —a very valuable treasure, indeed—had once been kept in the box by Mr. Winthrop in the course of his chemical experiments."

"Three cheers for Poole!" broke in Jack, exuberantly.

"I beg of you—don't," interposed Poole. "In-

stead, Jack, now that all suspicion has been removed from your shoulders, won't you please explain just what you were doing, stealing into the house after midnight on that eventful night?"

"Why"—Jack looked around him and grinned—"I wanted a smoke before turning in, and I discovered down there in the bungalow that I'd left my confounded pipe on the library table. It was late, you know—everybody in bed, and the house all shut up. So I went after it in the easiest way I could think of—through Evelyn's window."

"I fancied as much," said Poole, in the midst of the laughter that followed. Evelyn ran across the room, and, throwing her arms around her brother, kissed him impulsively.

"Isn't it fine—isn't it just wonderful!" she exclaimed, ecstatically, hugging the youth.

"I say, don't strangle me," protested Jack, at the fervent embrace. "Go and hug Poole; he's the hero of this performance."

Evelyn's face flushed darkly red. With one arm still around Jack's neck, she turned with glowing face and eyes to Poole.

"I think you're the most wonderful man that ever lived!" she began, ardently, when Colonel Winthrop again interrupted.

"But the safe, Poole, boring the lock, you know; you haven't explained that."

An expectant hush quickly fell upon the circle.

Poole folded his arms, and a slow, mournful smile crossed his face. "Just so. And my little triumph ends in a sad anti-climax, after all. It seems that on the same night, and concurrent with the beginning

of our little mystery of the ruby, an ordinary burglary took place and the safe was robbed of what money it held. I am ashamed to say that this commonplace theft, which your local police might have run down in a day or two, has been—has been too much for me." He flung out his hands with a little gesture of failure and regret.

"Oh, forget it," cut in Jack. "You've put over a darned sight bigger job than that! What if some scamp did get away with twenty dollars?"

"Why, of course!" agreed Evelyn. "Just the same, though, it is a pity that Mr. Poole didn't catch him, too."

Poole bowed silently before the verdict. Across the room Archie was nonchalantly lighting a cigarette, but the hand in which he held the match perceptibly trembled.

CHAPTER XXV

"AND you still insist on going this afternoon?" In the motor-car, with the engine already whirring, Evelyn put the question to Poole as he stood on the steps of the veranda.

Poole ruefully shook his head. "I'm awfully sorry. I'd like so much to stay—especially now that we've cleared the air of all this mystery nonsense—but I can't. You see, it's already more than two weeks—"

"What's two weeks? Besides, it doesn't really count; you were working all the time—"

"Oh, I shall remember a canoe-ride or two among many other happy, idle hours," Poole interrupted.

Evelyn surveyed him debatingly. "I suppose we are not very interesting now that there is no longer any mystery to engage you."

"Aren't you a little unkind to put it that way?"

"Aren't you just a little precipitate in bolting this way?" Evelyn countered. Then she sighed. "But I know there is no moving you when once you are determined to do anything. And you won't go along with me now to Burwick? It's only eleven o'clock."

In spite of his resolve Poole was tempted to snatch this last hour with her. What was an hour more or less? And yet, as his eye fell upon her hands grasp-

ing the steering-wheel, and the solitaire diamond blazing full before him, he steeled himself to his purpose. After the sudden shattering of his hopes he had set himself the task of immediate and utter renunciation.

"You see, I'm running over to the hospital this morning instead of this afternoon expressly on your account," went on Evelyn, "because you are going this afternoon. And I want you to come along because I haven't half thanked you for all you've done in clearing Jack and showing how perfectly splendid he's been all along. I'm ashamed of myself for ever doubting him in the least. It was awfully disloyal and mean of me—don't you think so?"

Poole shifted from one foot to the other.

"No, don't try to disagree with me," continued Evelyn. "It would be polite, but not honest. And you won't go with me to Burwick? This is my last—probably the very last—request I may make of you."

Poole ground his heel on the step. "Thanks, Miss Winthrop, but—I can't really; I can't," he finished hurriedly, and with a quick smile and nod of farewell he retreated up the steps. The car departed with its lone occupant.

"How strangely he is acting," Evelyn mused, as the machine climbed toward the Saddle-back. "He's not cross with me, but he acts as if—as if he were disappointed over something. And he'll never tell anything." She shook her head sadly.

Down into the valley beyond the Saddle-back and presently into Burwick the motor-car blithely hummed, driven by a thoughtful, disconsolate girl.

But as she entered the hospital and followed the attendant to Joe Spurling's room she mustered a smile of greeting for her patient. He looked up eagerly and stretched out a hard brown hand to hers.

"It's awfully good of you to drop in and see me this way. It's plagued tiresome lying everlastingly on your back when you can't turn over."

"I know it must be, but you're going to be a real model patient," declared Evelyn.

"I dunno," said Spurling, grimly. "Mebbe I can hold out, but most likely I'll start up and smash things in a couple of weeks, I'll get so desperate."

"No, you won't." Smiling confidently, Evelyn seated herself in a chair beside his bed. "We shall keep you amused somehow. So you had a visitor yesterday afternoon," she began, abruptly; and in spite of herself a little color glowed in her cheeks.

"Mr. Poole? Oh yes. I like him," said Spurling.

"So do I," said Evelyn. "But he's going away this afternoon."

"No—that so? Then I won't see him again?" Spurling frowned a moment in thought.

"We've had the biggest mystery at the house perplexing everybody for the last two weeks. Mr. Poole has solved it at last, and it's really the biggest joke—"

Spurling looked up delightedly. "Oh, then, Poole's told, has he? I'm glad it's all cleared up and that it wasn't anything but a joke. Of course, I knew it *must* be a joke—"

"How do you mean?" asked Evelyn, in some bewilderment.

"Why, it was me who bored the safe for your

cousin, Mr. Archie Winthrop. He explained that it was only to be a game—a mock burglary, he said. But I must say I didn't quite relish it—forcing my way into the house and drilling that old safe in the dead of night, even if I did have his word for it. I've been worried off and on about it. Mr. Poole asked me point blank yesterday if I wasn't the chap who did it, so I up and told him yes."

"Then Mr. Poole knew it was you who did it?" queried Evelyn, ingenuously, while her eyes thoughtfully studied Spurling.

"Of course. Didn't he tell you?"

"He didn't tell me that," said Evelyn.

"Well, I'm glad it's all straight anyway, for it had me worried some—" Spurling paused and frowned. "If I hadn't a daredevil streak in me I wouldn't 'a' tackled a job like that. As it was, it took a lot of coaxing from Mr. Archie Winthrop before I agreed to do it. Playing burglar isn't exactly my line."

"When did Archie first suggest it to you?" asked Evelyn.

"Nigh on two months ago, now."

"And did he tell you then that it was just a game that we were playing?"

"Sure, but I shied at it even at that. But it's all straight now—no mischief done?"

"Oh, it's worked out beautifully!" Evelyn's smile reassured him. "And you made a splendid burglar!"

"I'm some relieved in my mind," said Spurling.

A quarter of an hour later Evelyn motored homeward with a grave and perplexed frown upon her face. "It was Archie who did it, and Mr. Poole

knew it all the time, and yet he—he lied about it. Now why did he do that? And why did Archie want Joe Spurling to open the safe?"

She shook her head over these questions, to which she strove in vain to find some answer. "There's still some mystery behind all this that hasn't been explained and won't be unless I investigate it," she concluded. "It's something between Archie and Mr. Poole. I wonder if that's why he's acting so queerly."

Kenji Kato had completed Poole's packing at the house, and then had collected his own modest belongings. His little room in the bungalow now presented a meticulously neat and clean interior. One object alone remained unpacked: upon the table was a piece of gold Nishizin brocade—a treasure he had produced from some mysterious source and which, folding it with deft fingers, he now proceeded to wrap in fine rice-paper. While he was thus engaged he kept an expectant lookout at the window. Now and then he nodded confidently, smiling to himself and talking softly in Japanese. Clearly, something was afoot, and of his own planning.

When he caught sight of Evelyn returning alone in the motor-car his eye lighted eagerly. From the window he watched her drive the car to the garage and then return across the lawn toward the house. It was the opportunity for which he had evidently been waiting, and, picking up the package of brocade, he sallied forth to overtake her.

"Miss Winthrop will pardon a rudeness—a speech of a moment?" he said bowing.

Evelyn turned, somewhat puzzled.

"Mr. Poole have regret to go this afternoon, filled with thousand pleasant memories. I have beg forgiveness for making myself so bold"—he held out to her the package—"will you permit me to offer this as the congratulation for your coming happy marriage."

"Why, Kenji, a present for me? But I am not going to be married!"

"Pardon. Not immediately, perhaps? But my master and I shall be already far away. Pray indifferently to accept this." And with quaint courtesy he placed the gift in her hands.

An exclamation of surprise and delight escaped Evelyn's lips as on opening the folds of rice-tissue the rich gold brocade was revealed.

"It is but poor small token," went on the donor, deprecatingly, "in honor of happy approaching marriage."

"How perfectly beautiful!" Evelyn admiringly lifted the heavy, glittering folds, and then regarded Kenji Kato as if in a quandary. "But I'm not going to be married," she repeated, kindly. "I'm not even engaged. What put it into your head that I was?"

Serenely unmoved by her repeated negatives, the little Japanese smiled knowingly and bowed again. "I have to beg pardon, but my ear caught it—by a mere happening. I heard Mr. Winthrop say to Mr. Poole that your promise was given. Congratulations for the happiness and the peace of the Four Seas, as we say."

"You mean that Archie told Mr. Poole that?"

asked Evelyn, now wide-eyed and seriously regarding him.

"Yes, Miss Winthrop. You are to become his wife—so he told Mr. Poole. Therefore, this humble gift, I make bold to present."

"When did you hear this, Kenji?"

"Last evening. At that time suddenly my master informs to me that the time is arrived to depart." He bowed as if to withdraw. "I trust you will condescend to take my poor present—"

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Evelyn, her smile flashing radiantly upon him. "I shall always treasure it and your kind thought of me. It's perfectly dear of you! But really I'm *not* to be married, Kenji. There is some mistake."

"That may be as Buddha wills," the little fellow concluded, quite undisturbed by her words, and elaborately he bowed again.

Evelyn watched him retreat to the bungalow, with an amused but slightly vexed smile which little by little gave way to a grave, troubled expression.

CHAPTER XXVI

"WHERE'S Archie?"

Evelyn deposited Kenji's gift upon a cabinet in the library and addressed Grimes, who was straightening the magazines on the reading-table.

"I think he's in his room, Miss Evelyn. I'll look and see," said the butler, dropping his work.

"Never mind, thank you, Grimes. I'll go."

She traversed the length of the hall and, turning down the corridor that led to Archie's room, knocked boldly on the door, which stood half ajar.

"Hullo, Thistles, what's up?" queried Archie, rising and dropping his novel into the capacious depths of the big morris-chair where he had been indolently reading. "Hullo, what *is* up?" he repeated, with a different accent, as he noted the sober, questioning face of the girl who stood at the threshold.

Evelyn stepped inside the room and drew the door shut behind her. "Archie," she began, and then hesitated. "Archie, did you tell Mr. Poole that we were engaged?"

The man faced her for a moment without speaking. The width of the room lay between them—Evelyn still clutching the knob of the door behind her, the man steadying himself with a hand upon the chair from which he had risen.

"I did," said Archie, quietly.

"Why did you?"

"Because I love you," replied the man, again quietly.

"Is that the only reason?" pursued Evelyn, in the same level, unmoved voice. Her blue eyes, from whose depths all light and laughter had gone, gravely held his own. Never had she seemed so beautiful to him as now, at this stern, questioning moment, when he abruptly realized that she was lost to him forever. His glance wavered and fell. He flung out his arms in a gesture of defeat and dropped again into the chair.

"He said he was in love with you himself," he replied, with his head bent between his hands. The years that he had loved her—the years that stretched back to their boy-and-girlhood days—seemed to sweep by him in a flash and to vanish forever. He felt the presence of a strange and unknown woman in the room, looking down sadly but accusingly upon him.

"And you led him—led him to think that I loved you and had promised to marry you?" Her voice gently but firmly pursued him.

He looked up suddenly, his face revealing the heavy anguish of his soul, while his love for her flared up in one last burst of passion before it should spend itself forever in the smoldering ashes of despair.

"I love you, Evie. I've always loved you. Never any one before you, and now—never any one to come after you. A man will do anything for a love like that. He'll fight for it to the bitter end. To lie for it is easy." He was on his feet again, his face pale, his words coming in short, broken phrases in the choking intensity of his feeling. "Don't judge

me harshly. I give up. I'm beaten. I've lost—everything. Remember that. From this hour the world is nothing but an empty shell in my hands. He loves you. I've felt it, divined it, feared it from the very start. And you love him—that alone I have refused to let myself believe. . . . I've wronged you, but I'll put matters right. I'll do the square thing—the only thing left to do. . . . Forgive me, Thistles. In the years of happiness that I pray may be yours let me cherish at least the thought that you have forgiven me the wrong I would have done you out of my very love."

"Archie!"

She came slowly across the room to where he stood, pale and shaken by his emotion, and put her hands gently upon his shoulders. "You will always be very dear to me, not in the way you have wished, but dear to me in a way that others cannot alter or time change. You have acted nobly—"

"Don't say that!" He drew away from her with a look of pain. "I'm not noble. I'm—I'm only trying now to be—a good loser." A ghost of a smile played about his bloodless lips. "It's Poole who has acted the noble part," he went on, now resolved to immolate himself utterly. "He did what few men in his place would have done. He—"

"He shielded you, didn't he?" interrupted Evelyn.

Archie started in surprise. "How do you know?"

"I only know that it was you who broke into the safe, and that, although Mr. Poole knew it, he refrained from telling. It was Joe Spurling who told me. But why should Mr. Poole—"

"Evie, I beg of you, don't ask me that. And, if

you can, I implore you to let this mystery remain one to you. I will tell you this much—that once, foolishly, carelessly, I worked some one a great injury. It was the record of that fact, hidden in the safe, that I sought to destroy. Will you believe just that, and not seek to know more? It would have shattered me hopelessly in your estimation. That's why Poole shielded me—lied like a gentleman—because he thought that you loved me and that this—this hidden fact—would wreck your faith in me forever."

"But nothing you ever did could be so bad as that!" protested the girl, fondly.

"Then try to think so, Thistles." Tears had started to his eyes at the tribute her innocence had paid him. "I should like to have you think that always of me, however unworthy I have been. But promise me you will blot this mystery out of your mind, if you can, and never seek to understand it."

"I promise," she said, simply, holding out both her hands to him. They stood for a moment in silence, and then with misty eyes she lifted her cheek for him to kiss.

Evelyn fled softly to her room and shut the door. Poole loved her. Alone, she hugged to herself the tremendous realization of that fact, while her pulses hammered tumultuously and her whole body seemed to tingle with a new, incredible delight. He loved her, he had acknowledged it; and, more than this, at a moment when he thought her heart was bestowed elsewhere, he had striven to defend her love from a cruel, perhaps deadly hurt. Whatever the mystery of Archie's conduct, Poole had refused to reveal it

because the blow would have fallen upon the man he believed she loved.

And he was going in an hour or two. She realized now the significance of his abrupt decision to depart, and what it must have cost him ruthlessly to act upon it. But Archie would tell him. . . . A sudden impulsive thought seized her, carried her away with its rash venturesomeness. She picked up a ring from the dressing-table and slipped it on her finger. Then, with a flush of color in her cheeks and her eye sparkling, she slipped furtively out of the door. As she passed the dining-room she had a glimpse of Grimes setting the last pieces of silver in place on the luncheon-table. She mounted swiftly, silently up the stairs, and went toward Poole's room.

At sight of the open door a panic of timidity seized her, but she knocked. Poole turned from a moody survey of his trunks, locked and strapped and assembled in the middle of the floor.

"I came to tell you that luncheon is almost ready," she announced from the threshold, her first resolve altogether failing her.

"Thank you," said Poole, and his face clearly showed that he was puzzled.

"And now that I'm here, I'll tell you something else," she rushed on, for fear her new courage would desert her. It was madness, but in the whirl of the moment she no longer cared.

"I'm not—and never was—engaged to Archie."

A crimson tide swept over her face once the words were beyond recall.

He had quivered at the words as at an unexpected blow. Then the significance of them flashed full

upon him, and the meaning of her now faltering presence. When she ventured a quick, timid glance at him she beheld a man transformed.

"Evelyn!" he said, and paused.

Then, abruptly, the impulse seized her to escape. "Good-by until luncheon," she said, with a little laugh, and turned to flee.

He was at her side in a bound, seizing her hands, which she half struggling tried to withhold from him. Her resistance was but a spur, and he caught her sharply to him, holding her shy, flushed, yet laughing face close to his own. He strove to read her soul in her eyes, but a roguish light now played in them as, with head drawn back, she looked up at him.

"But I don't understand." He began gropingly to find words at last. "This—this ring," and he confronted her with the offending finger of her left hand, on which the single stone blazed.

Evelyn burst into a peal of exultant laughter. "Oh, you stupid—stupid—stupid man! And we have all been thinking you so clever! Here I've been flashing it before your eyes all morning every chance I got, and you never even dreamed!" She thrust the ring close to his face. "Can't you see—can't you be made to see—it's only your white sapphire that you dropped into the ink-well and defied us to discover?"

Poole bit his lips in sudden and complete chagrin.

"I had it set in a ring, but such a mere detail would never deceive a really close observer," she taunted him, reveling in the chance. "Don't—you hurt!" she protested with a smothered laugh as he crushed her to him.

Words seemed to have fled his tongue. He could neither make rejoinder nor manfully assert himself in this situation, where she was so completely the master, although locked in his arms.

Then abruptly, with her hands on his shoulders, she drew back, looking up at him with eyes in whose depths love and surrender clearly shone, although the glint of mischief still played wickedly in them, and she said:

"I've done everything but propose to you. Must I do that, too?"

THE END

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